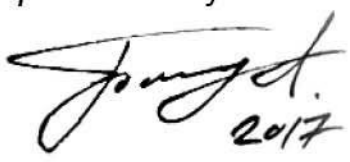
Way of the Departed

There are more stories to be told about Ninjago than we can fit into our TV series. Often those stories are never told. We get other ideas, choose to focus differently, priorities change or we just change our minds.
This one of those stories. It's a story about Cole and the scar which appeared on his face after the events on the *Day of the Departed*. What is that scar? Why is it there? Questions which has been left unexplained so far, but something I've wanted to explore ever since that Ninjago TV special.

When I first started writing this story, I did not know if I would ever finish it. I still don't, but at least it has quite a few chapters now.
I am writing it under a certain dogma that I have put up for myself: Each chapter (except the first) must be exactly three pages long, and I am never more than three chapters ahead of what I have already published. I am making stuff up as I type, and that's part of the fun of working on it.
I know what the outcome of the story will be, but I have no idea how it will get there. Or if it will ever get there.

The Ninjago TV series is aimed at kids, but we are fortunate that it has been around for so enough that it has followers who has grown up with it. So this one is for you guys who are just a bit older and appreciate a tone which is a bit darker that what we normally do on the show.
Some writers have written official Ninjago literature. They have done great stuff, but often it has not perfectly aligned with the development and future storyline of the TV show.
In *'Way of the Departed'* I draw from and connect some of those books and comics. And at least knowing where the TV show will go, allows me to not contradict the canon.

This is a non-canon piece of fan fiction. But should you need potential answers to some subjects left unaddressed in the coming seasons of Ninjago, '*Way of the Departed*' may offer some.



It is cold and I am freezing.
I shouldn't be, because I am not alive.
I am in an ice labyrinth. It feels like I have been here before, and it feels like I shouldn't be here.
My friends are with me. They are looking at their reflections in the walls of ice and discuss what they mean. In their reflections they look different. Older and wiser. They wear the robes of sensei. Jay seems ecstatic that his reflection has an eye patch. He thinks it is cool. Then there is a change in his mood and he seems to be hiding something. We haven't been the best of friends lately. I try not to think too much about it.

As I walk up to the ice wall I wonder about my own reflection. I look alive again and it doesn't quite make sense. My hands are glowing bright orange, but what really catches my eye is something on my forehead. A small green scar. I get really close to get a good look, and realize that there is something moving inside it. It starts to glow. I am blinded by light as I stare into an abyss.
My friends and I have seen many strange things and places, but this one takes the cake. Faces float by in a constantly twisting maelstrom of green. They are hard to make out, but some seem familiar to me, and I hear a voice I have not heard in a long time. It is calling my name over and over.
It hurts deep inside, so I take a step back from the wall. But my reflection doesn't respond. He just stands there staring coldly back at me. The scar on his forehead starts to convulse. First just a bit but then more violently. And then his entire head splits open. It is unbearable to watch, but I find myself unable to look away. The headless body falls to the ground without a sound, but the scar remains floating in mid air. I try to turn away, but now I can't move. My friends are still chatting, but it seems like their voices are a million miles away. I realize this is the end. The scar keeps growing and is now as big as me. I just stand there, as it leaves the ice wall. It comes at me and consumes me. Everything goes green.

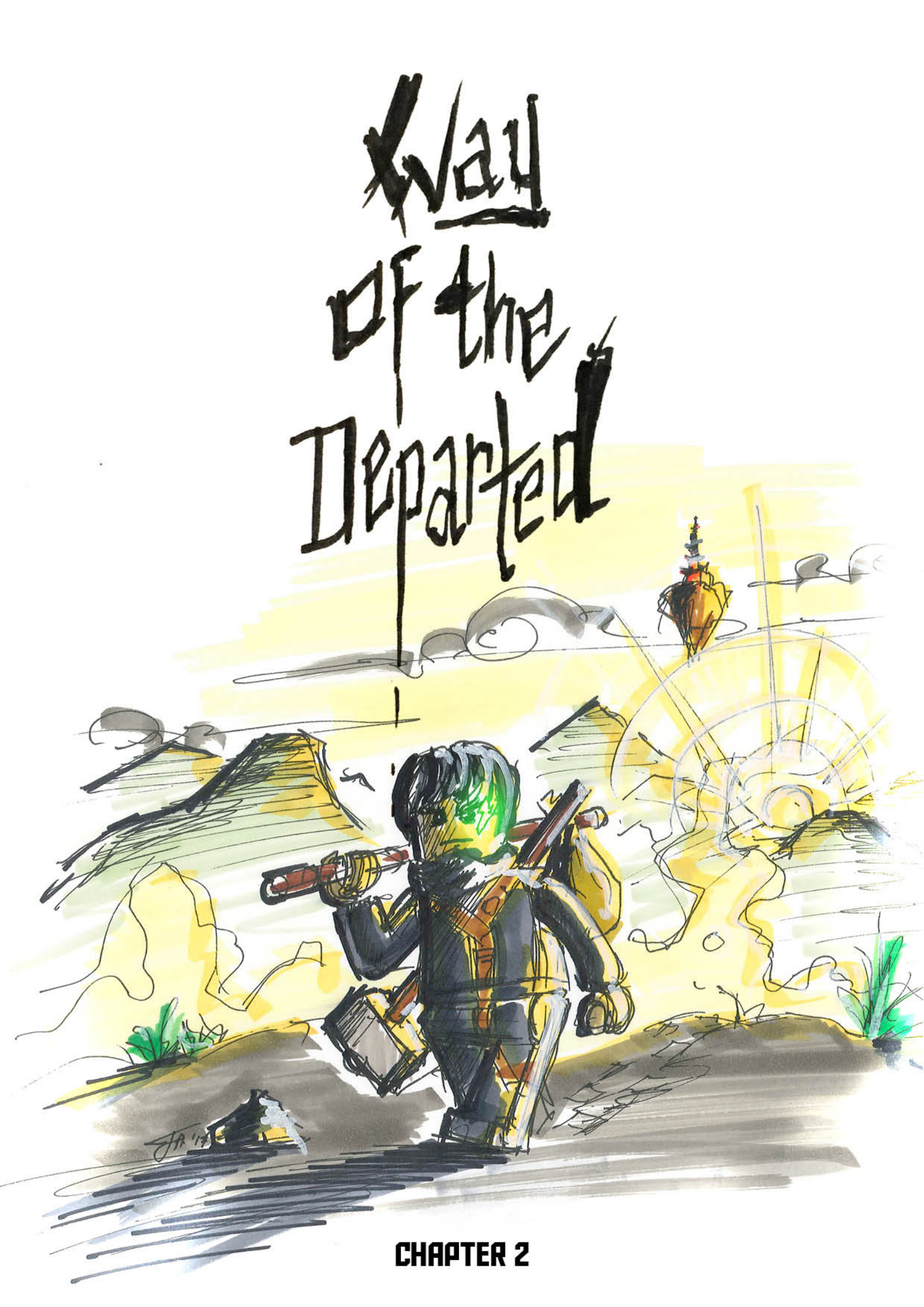
This is when I wake up. It always is. I must have had this dream a hundred times, but I have never told anyone about it. It's *my* secret and there seems to be a lot of those lately.

I am in my room in our home, an old temple floating a three hundred yards above ground. We don't know why. It just did one day. I suspect Jay and Nya knows something about it somehow. The have been really close lately, sometimes playful and clearly in love, but other times they seem bewildered, talk in hushed voices and they seem to be examining the temple grounds. I am happy for them but it's also disturbing. I know something about the Temple of Airjitzu as well; It is still haunted. I could tell the others but it would freak out Jay, so I've kept it to myself. Secrets.

Waking up tonight is different though. My room is bathed in a bright green light. It reminds me of how Lloyd's eyes have started changing after Master Wu went missing. He trains alone so intensely, and he is really connecting with his powers ... whatever it is. He has done well filling in after Master Wu, but the is clearly not comfortable with it.
After a few seconds of trying to find the source of the green light, I realize the source is me. The light comes from me. From the scar on my forehead. And that's not the only thing which is different.
By the window the ghost of Master Yang floats in mid air. I get the feeling he has been watching me for a while. There is an expression of sadness on his face which I haven't seen since that night on top of the temple. The night he intended to curse me, but ended up saving me. I became mortal again and he chose to remain behind as the master of the house ... or tried to save me as I am about to be told.

After an uncomfortable silence I ask him about my glowing scar. His voice quivers as he speaks and the answer cuts me like a knife. "My dear Cole. That's not a scar … it's a rift. And it will open soon...".

Way of the Departed



CHAPTER 2

*‘**Cole! Cooole! You’re missing training.** Hurry up or Lloyd will give us one of his speeches on punctuality, dedication and discipline. I don’t wanna listen to one of his speeches on punctuality, dedication and discipline. Coooole!’*
The shrill voice of Jay cut through the cold morning air like a scythe. It was often windy and cold at the Temple of Airjitzu. That’s one of the draw backs of living high above the clouds. Another was getting up and down. But there were more advantages than draw backs: For instance one heck of a view! Real estate agent Patty Keys was constantly sending the ninja pamphlets to persuade them to sell. They weren’t going to sell, and they were starting to feel really bad for the mail man who had to make the trip up there several times each months. His job hadn’t become easier either. Nya had come up with a system by which they could move the floating island to new locations as they pleased. All it took was some very thick chains and the powerful boosters of the Destiny’s Bounty. The sad reality was, that the prospect of a temple with an ever changing view, just got Patty Keys even more eager ... which meant more work for the mail man and his old pedal propelled bicycle. Cole had considered to reveal that the Temple was still haunted to scare Patty off. But he had decided against it for Jay’s sake.
This morning Cole was nowhere to be found. As Jay entered his room, all he found was Cole’s neatly made bed, and a note carefully placed on his pillow.

Cole was already far away. He had left before sunrise, which is pretty early when your live on a floating mountain. He was on foot and carried only a small bindle with some food and necessities (cake) plus his new weapon of choice, a heavy hammer which had been given to him by his father Lou. Cole was glad that his father had come to terms with him being a ninja, and the gift of the hammer seemed to be the definite approval from him. Cole had become quite fond of it too. Sure it took some getting used to, and it was A LOT heavier than his old scythe, but it seemed very fitting for a Master of Earth to wield a hammer.

But that wasn't exactly what was on Cole's mind as he wandered on. He was still haunted by his dream and what Master Yang had told him.

I am Yang ... I used to be known as the Sensei without students. I was very strict about titles back then. Being a Sensei is not something you come by easily, and so others should respect you. I used to be very strict with my students about such formalities. Now I am but a ghost of my former glory. No longer a Sensei but still the master of the Temple of Airjtzu. It is floating in the sky. For a while I was extremely confused about it, but since the Ninja moved in, I have obtained a few answers. First I asked Cole, but he was as clueless as I was. Jay on Nya on the other hand seemed to know something. I have been able to eavesdrop on them on several occasions, and I have picked up bit and pieces. Apparently events involving the notorious djinn pirate king Nadakhan happened and un-happened, and my Temple becoming airborne is an anomaly of those events.
So Nadakhan and is still out there. I Wonder what possibilities that presents. Is there some special way djinn cheat death? Can a djinn really die? I will need to look into that.

I have done terrible things in my pursuit for immortality, acceptance and glory. My fate, bound forever to this temple, is a fitting punishment, and I am at peace with that. I still feel shameful sometimes, and hope that I will one day be able to redeem myself to the students I wronged.
I have just one student now: Cole. We have agreed to keep my presence a secret for the time being. I suspect that old Wu had some suspicion too. Once he stared intensely at my painting in the main dojo for several minutes, then chuckled and winked at it before leaving. But he is gone now, so only Cole knows for sure.

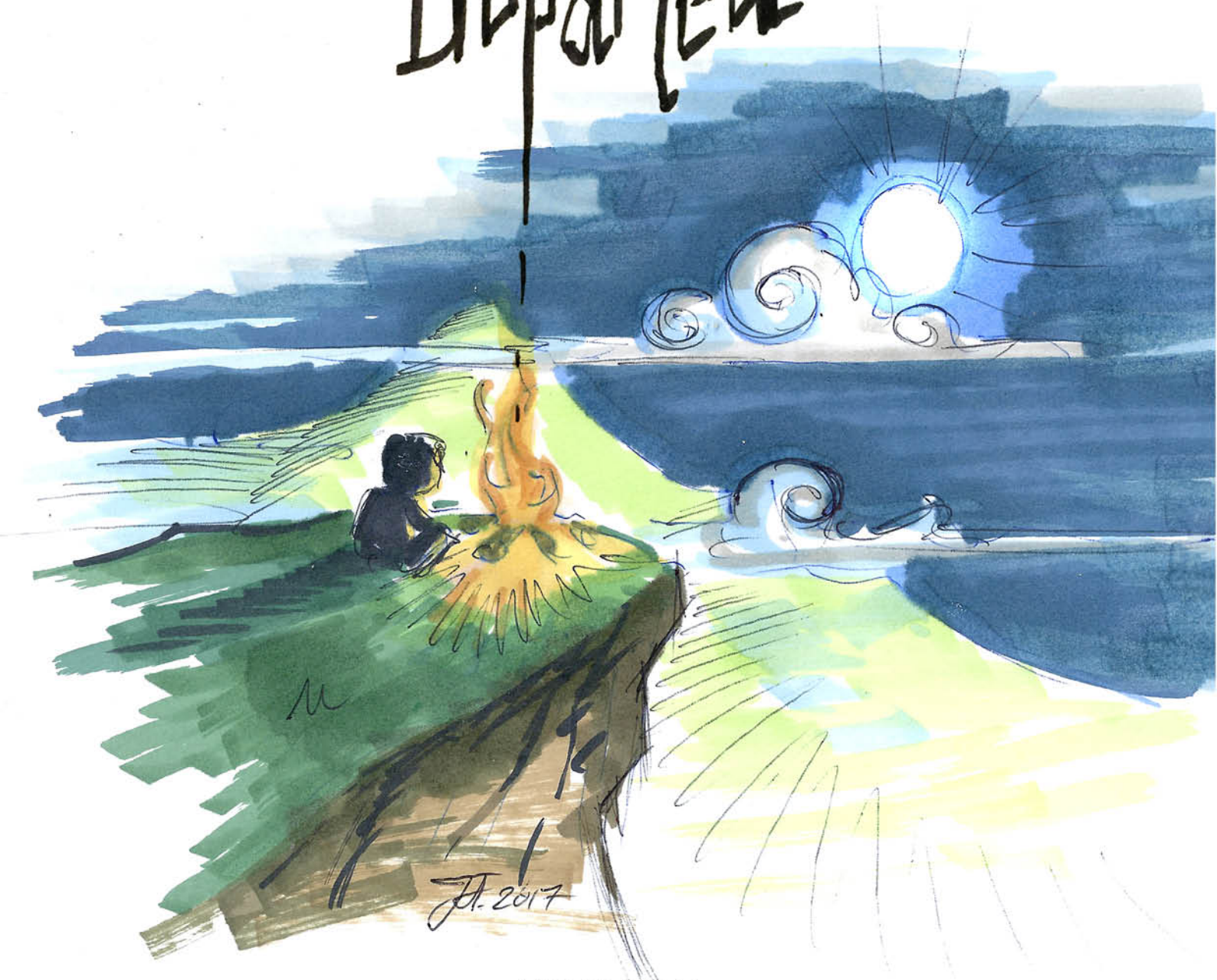
We I have discussed at length the nature of our relationship. It is one forged out of necessity. I desperately need company. I admit that now. And he still has many questions about his

own existence having been touched by death in several ways himself.
There is another reason too. I finally told him last night.

Before we met, I foolishly experimented with life and death. Now I pay the price. After the incident where I used the Yin Blade and brought a curse onto myself, the Temple and my students, I found myself with plenty of time on my hands. I spent those captive years studying curses and the after life. And the place I yearn to go most of all, but never can:
The Departed Realm is the most mysterious of all. All of Ninjago's residents who have passed away in the true sense of the word, have gone there. Only a few has ever made it back. Normally, if you can talk about normal when you talk about Realms, travel between them is possible in several ways. But the Departed Realm is different. Incantations, dragons, Realm Crystals, Travellers Tea or back doors are not enough. To access the Departed Realm you need a rift. But a rift is dangerous, unstable, seems to have a will of it's own and you have to force it open. You can never be sure of the outcome. I worry about Cole.
I don't know what will happen, but I have had much time since the last Day of the Departed to think about it. There are many possibilities but none of them are good. Cole is a pawn in it. I have no doubt that his dream speaks some truth, and if so he will perish. This is tragic enough, but I fear even more is at stake. What will happen if a rift is unchecked? Will it keep expanding? Will it consume Ninjago just as the it did Cole in his dream? Will the Departed be able to re-enter Ninjago? If they do, how many will there be of them and what will they be? This is a direct result of my doings on the Day of the Departed. I was starting to feel that there may have been more good than bad that came out of that fateful night: Cole turned mortal again, my students' curse was lifted and my old lonely temple was cleansed and became the home of the Ninja. But now I see that it isn't so.

The rift on Cole's forehead MUST be closed!

Way of the Departed



CHAPTER 3

It is night and I am tired. Soon I will need to sleep. Surrendering myself to the dream again scares me. The bonfire in front and me crackles. It should warm me but I feel cold like in the dream. For the hundredths time I question why I went alone. 'Ninja never leave a ninja behind. Work as a team. Trust your friends'. All those lessons Master Wu taught us. Why am I ignoring them? I guess there are some things that you just need to do on your own. Master Wu went alone to confront Acronix at the burned down monastery. Look what that got him: Rapidly aging and ultimately trapped in time. I feel like I have failed him. Why am I here on a quest of my own when Lloyd swore we would not rest until we found him again? We have done a lot of searching, but this is not like finding a lost pair of gloves. Master Wu was lost in time, so this is not just a question of where but also when. It could be impossible. Maybe he is not even here yet or has been and no longer is. We all know it. No one has said it out loud, though I have felt Jay bursting to do so several times. Restraint from Jay ... Imagine that! I guess we are growing older. He is my search partner. Lloyd split us up in the beginning to widen the search. Two in each search party. Jay and I, Kai and Zane, Nya and Lloyd.

Jay is good company, if you can endure the constant steam of words coming at you. He keeps jabbering on about the secret identity of Samurai X claiming that he's got it all figured out. He must have guessed on everyone in Ninjago by now. Even someone called Ekosan, though he quickly disregarded that theory and then flat out denied having ever said it. One day he almost assaulted the hapless mail man who was just dropping on yet another flyer from Patty Keys. *'Admit it! Reveal your secret!'*, he shouted at him. The poor guy started stuttering something about the obscure practices on how it is decided who gets their portrait on a stamp and who doesn't. In a good/ bad cop situation, Jay would definitely be the bad cop. Lloyd saved the mail man that day and apologized. We didn't see him for six weeks after that.

First we hit the Library at Domu. Jay had all these wild theories about time travel, and theorized that if Master Wu

had fallen into the past, he would have left a message or a book for us to find there. Fourteen days of intense reading later, we abandoned the book idea. He could have left a message in any way ... more likely a message on something more durable than paper. Carving on rocks? We then started searching places that held special meaning to him: The monastery where he lived with his brother. The Caves of Despair where Morro had perished. Zane and Kai even hired Ronin to take them to the First Spinjtzu Master's Tomb. But leaving no rock unturned is a better saying than something lived out in real life. Just like 'We shall not rest until...'.
That's why we returned to the Temple once in a while: To rest. But we were all restless. So rest turned to training instead. We found new techniques and opportunities within Spinjitzu. Ray and Maya couldn't be very helpful either. They had created the Time Blades and we still had one of them. But just the one and no plan. Also Lloyd insisted that it was too dangerous to keep around, so Kai and Nya returned it to the Boiling Sea. It will be safe there ... only a master of water and fire together can go there,
After reuniting with Kai and Nya, Ray and Maya went on a tour of Ninjago. They probably still are catching up. Kai and Nya went on for so many years not knowing what happened to them. That must have been hard. And now they have to go through the whole thing again but with Master Wu. I am tired of losing people in my life! I hope Ray and Maya are having fun and I hope that Kai and Nya are sti...

It is cold and I am freezing. I shouldn't be, because I am not alive. I am in an ice labyrinth. It feels like I ...

I wake with a jerk. Where am I? I stare into a bonfire ... oh yes ... of course. I must have nodded off for a second. Man, that dream is there immediately. It's like a predator stalking me and just waiting for me to let my guard down. I drink some tea and eat a bite of Mrs. Walker's crumb cake that I brought along with me. It doesn't taste very good tonight though. I'm sure that it is more my state of mind's than the

cakes fault, but it tastes like ash ... I still wash it down with the tea. Eating cake is like muscle memory to me. It's just something I do to occupy my hands and mouth some times. I love cake but I think it would be healthy for me to cut back. In several ways.

I think about what Master Yang told me. He has told me not to call him master, but it still slips once in a while.
Though he is bound to the temple, he can still reach out into the outside world through former possessions of his. Like that painting on the wall in the museum. He was careful not to get my hopes up too much, but he suggested that I would start my search for answers at a village called Nom. I recognize the name, but I can't quite put my finger on it. We were together when he reached out. It took all of his concentration. It was extra hard because of the distance he told me afterwards. I swear I could almost see him sweating. A ghost sweating ... that's a contradiction in itself. When I was a ghost I never sweat. I wonder if sweat would have stung. Ghost logic ... who can really tell? When he finished, he was completely exhausted. He could hardly talk, but said that he had felt a presence in Nom who might be able to shed some light on my situation. I should be able to get there by tomorrow night if I walk all day.
But before that, there is one big obstacle in my way, and it's time I close my eyes to face it.
I take one last sip of tea, throw another log on the fire and scowl myself for not bringing a blanket. I guess planning ahead is not my strong suit. Tonight will be a cold one.
I close my eyes and try to think happy thoughts.
I am 5 years old. I see my father and my mother dancing in the moonlight on the terrace in front of our old house. I have been tucked in, but I've snuck out to watch them. I do that often. My dad is so elegant. When I grow up I want to a be a dancer just like him. Why would I want to be anything else in world which so perfect?
.... ***. It is cold, and I am freezing.***

Way of the Departed

CHAPTER 4

I have been walking for the entire day.
The walk is proving more difficult than I had imagined. I didn't get too much sleep last night and won't be able to make it all the way to Nom today. That means another night under the sky without a blanket. It started to rain last night, so tonight I will make sure I have shelter.
The sun is setting. There is a forest here, which should provide some cover for me. I walk in just far enough so I can still see edge of the forest and won't get lost. A loud animal shriek shreds the silence. I must have disturbed some animal. I continue in. The fire will keep whatever it was at bay. There are logs fallen over here. Some seem to have been uprooted or cut down as part of a battle, but they are rotting and overgrown so it must have been a while ago. I don't worry about it. I just want to get as warm as I can, eat a bit of crumb cake and ready myself to deal with my dream as much as I can.

One of the alarms has been triggered. It is time to go. My father thinks I am being paranoid, but ever since those strange time disturbances half a year ago, I have been more vigilant. It was the northern forest alarm. Through my spyglass I see a faint glow from near the edge of the forest. It is probably just some traveller, but you can never be too careful. I ask Jerahn to bring my gear.
As I make my way into the forest, I pass a pile of Nindroids. They have been lying here for a long time, and some have started to rust. It's an eye sore. My father really should make sure that they get salvaged. He is the mayor after all. They bring back memories of a different time and remind me that you can never anticipate what the future will bring. But I have to stay focused on the present. There is an outsider in our forest and I cannot take any chances. Silent as a ghost I move in on my target. That is my thing. Stealth and surprise. Though I wear metal armour I move with grace. I become one with the shadows and prepare some smoke pellets. In a second I will reveal myself in a display of mystery and magic. Like a phantom returning to Ninjago from a dead.

I watch from the dark. Only one person hunched over by a fire. An eerie green glow emanates from it's forehead. A being of magic? I cannot make out any features. By its side is a large hammer, but it is a special design and not one of the ones used by the quarry people in the west mountains. I will need to be careful.
My entrance will provoke a reaction in my target, and in a fraction of a second it will reveal what kind of an opponent it will be. Some freeze with fear. Some run away in terror. Nindroids tend to pause for a brief second as they analyse something that doesn't fit with the logic of their programming. That is usually enough time needed to overpower a few of them. Often when I reveal myself I won't even have to fight, but I doubt that this will be one of those times. I throw down two smoke pellets hard!

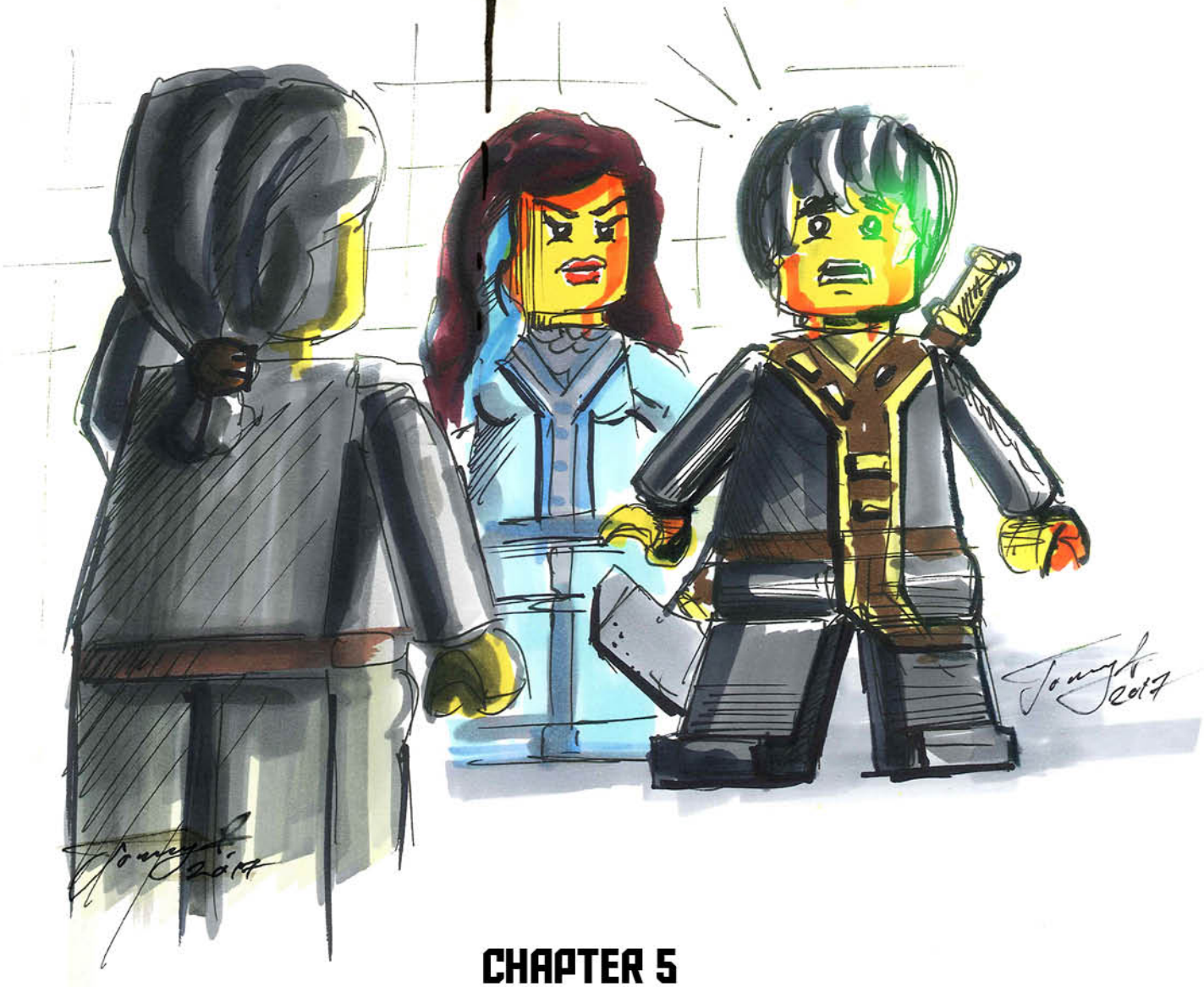
There is a sizzling sound. Instinctively I roll sideways, pick up my hammer and get to my feet in one movement. The entire area gets engulfed in smoke. It is bathed in the green light from my scar. A booming voice commands me.
'Surrender yourself to the Phantom!'. My mind races. Phantom? Does this have anything to do with the rift? Has some henchman of death arrived to claim me?
The apparition breaks through the smoke and I barely parry two swords. Gone again! I am at a disadvantage here. This is not a good place to fight with a heavy hammer. The space is too confined and I am blind in the smoke. I am attacked again. I block the swords but is kicked backwards. Just as I steady myself I am hit again from the back. The blows aren't that hard. It feels like whatever is in the smoke is trying to disarm me or drive me way, not take me down. It's time to turn the situation around. I drive my hammer hard into the ground. The entire forest shakes. I hammer my fists together hard and build up energy for my spin. The world becomes a blur as I whirl into my Spinjitzu tornado, clearing away the smoke and several of the smaller trees. I come out of it and grab my hammer. This is an arena fit for a fight!
'Cole?!?' . The voice saying my name is filled with disbelief.

'I'd heard that you were ... departed ... a ghost... gone.

I am speechless. I did not expect this. Not at all. I am standing in front of a friend that I thought had passed away. I have heard conflicting stories about what happened to him, and I guess I just assumed the worst. But here he is, standing in front of me looking quite alive. I don't know what to feel. Surprise, happiness, confusion all roll into one numb mess. I lower my swords. He looks back at me puzzled, lowers his hammer and smiles as he speaks.
'Nom! Of course ... that's where I have heard that name before! Hi Seliel! ... Still doing the Phantom Ninja thing I see!'.

45 minutes later Cole and Seliel arrived in Nom. The walk had given them plenty of time to catch up on the last few years, and it had been a nice and joyous walk. Seliel had been VERY surprised the hear about Nya and her powers of water. Apparently some charlatan called Lar had passed by the village and convinced everyone that HE was the Master of Water. He had even duped a local publisher to release fake stories about his "legendary" battles. Seliel was furious until Cole reminded her, that she herself was a bit of a con artist. I anyone had the right to call himself a Phantom Ninja, it would have been him. At least until recently.
Cole had neglected to go into any specific details about his scar or his dreams. All he had mentioned, that his Master had sent him on a mission to meet someone in Nom.
Phantom? Cole wondered if the person he was supposed to meet was Seliel. Could the whole 'Phantom Ninja' thing have mislead Master Yang to believe that the phantom was an actual ghost who would have some knowledge about the Departed Realm and the rift?
Seliel is chatting on about how well Nom has been doing. She is clearly proud of how her father has turned the village's factories into successful manufacturers of electronics. They are even doing business with Borg Industries now, and it is clear that the village is doing well. I am invited to sleep in the City Hall. Seliel says there is someone she wants me to meet tomorrow.

Way of the Departed



CHAPTER 5

The next morning Seliel asks me if I slept well. I lie and say that I did. She gives my a short tour of the town. It has changed a lot since we were last here. Ornate buildings have been built in the style and tradition of the Edo period. It reminds me a lot of the Temple of Airjitzu and the whole village has a lot more charm to it now. It all seems very authentic. When I ask about it Seliel tells me that some of it actually is authentic. It was brought here and restored from some decaying villages several hundred of miles south.
I wonder what Patty Keys would make of this. Probably better keep it a secret, or that poor old mail man will have yet another nail in his coffin. We really should talk to Cyrus Borg and get him to develop something to help him out.
We arrive at a dojo. Seliel proudly presents it as the Phantom Dojo. I guess I don't respond the right way, because she suddenly blushes and start talking about how silly that name is and how she means to change it. Her great inspiration is Nya, how she kept her identity secret and the rumours of a Samurai X cave. I tell her about the new Samurai X, and how no one knows who it is. Big mistake! She is all over me with questions I cannot answer, so I derail the barrage of questions asking to see the inside of the dojo.

Cole seems distracted. I feel foolish about trying to impress him with that stupid name of my dojo, but I think there is something on his mind. And I am also just stalling. That glowing scar on his face. He has been avoiding my questions about it, but it's obvious that it's not natural. That's why I want him to meet Jerahn. He is my aide and my sparring partner. He is younger than me, but he seems to have an older soul. He is a bit of an enigma to me but I trust him. He arrived here six months ago. He didn't talk much and seemed bewildered, confused and aimless. Like someone whose life has just been uprooted and needs to find a new direction. We are a welcoming community, my father insists on it, so we took him in and offered him a home and food in exchange for work. He renovates buildings for us. He turned out to be more helpful than we could have imagined.

Here he is now! He pauses as he enters the room and stares at Cole like he has seen a ghost. His eyes are filled with wonder. No ... not wonder. I can't quite read his expression. It's not confusion either. There is a bit of surprise somewhere in there. A moment passes. I look over at Cole. There is no particular reaction from him except he smiles politely. Jerahn walks across the room looking long and intensely at Cole's scar. Then shifts his eyes to meet Cole's.
'You look different!" The greeting catches Cole off guard.
'Have we met before? Do I know you?', Cole replies.
'We've met before. But we have never been properly introduced. When we last met you punched me in the face.'
Cole looks completely lost now.
'You didn't know my name then. You called me Chuck.'

I feel like I am being hit by my own hammer. Hard! I don't recognize the guy, but I recall the situation.
It is the Night of the Departed. I am being held in these special chains that work on ghosts. I need to stop Yang and I am doing my best to reason with my guard. When that fails I change my approach and 'persuade' him in a different way. I have thought about the situation many times since. I say the first thing that pops into my mind. It's not exactly clever.
'I didn't know you had long hair... and sorry ... for punching you ... and calling you names too, I guess.'
Jerahn lights up in a smile. *'Are you kidding?!? You freed me ... us. Look at me! I am whole again. You can call me Chuck all day long if you want to. I owe you!'.*
I breathe a sigh of relief, but still don't know what to say. After an awkward moment Seliel cuts in. I am grateful for that.
'This is Jerahn. He is our best carpenter. Or at least our most agile. If you need a roof mended Jerahn is your guy. He really knows how to swing a hammer and he knows AIRJITZU!'.
Smiling Jerahn look at the hammer hanging behind my back.
'I guess that makes two of us.'
My head is flooding over with questions. So Yang was right! There was a person here who may be able to help. But how

was Yang able to reach out to this place? Why did Seliel want us to meet and how did she know that we had a connection? Before I can ask, Seliel asks about my scar again. She looks strict now. When I try to evade the question, she cuts me off. She wants to know exactly what it is. Jerahn shifts uncomfortably. My mind is racing. Do I come clean? What should I say? I hardly know anything and this is way too personal. We stand there and the tension is unbearable.
Seliel shifts her eyes to Jerahn like she is giving him an unspoken command. Jerahn brushes his pale brown hair away from his face. And there is it is! It has the same shape and placement as mine. But it is not glowing green. It looks more like a real scar. Is it a scar?
'I appeared on me a few days after.', he says. *'The others got em too. They aren't always there though. They appear and disappear. It doesn't hurt when they are there. Only when they come and go. It varies how long they are there too.'*
I take my eyes off his scar, an look him straight in the eyes.
'Have you had ... dreams?'
He does not like that question. He looks over at Seliel with fear and guilt in his eyes. He hasn't told her.
'I ... I need to go. I've got some ... roofing to do.', he stutters and paces out of the dojo.
Seliel does NOT look happy. '*I do not appreciate having secrets about strange stigmatas, rogue magic and communal dreams roaming around in MY town! We are not finished!.*
She shoots me a scornful look and walks off after Jerahn.
I feel pretty bad about myself.
Outside the sun shines warmly. I would enjoy it if I didn't feel so guilty. I spot Seliel walking fast between two houses in search of Jerahn. I want to apologize and come clean to her, so I start to follow her, but she weaves in and out of narrow alleys and it's not easy to keep up.
Suddenly an arm grabs me and pulls into a doorway. My scar illuminates the darkness in an eerie green glow.
It's Jerahn. He hushes me as he leans out and looks up and down the street.
'There is something else I need to show you!'

Way of the Departed

CHAPTER 6

I play around with my powers while I wait and make a sculpture of Cole. It is effortless. I have years of interactions with him stored in my easy access memory banks. He has been gone for two days now. I look at the refractions in his shape. It is a hot day and he will be gone soon. I should not have made that. I detect my emotion readout decline. Two days are not a long time but the circumstances of his departure troubles me. The note he left behind was most perplexing.
She will be here soon. She is always punctual. I look up at the floating island in the sky. That does not compute. I have run countless scenarios but none of them make logic sense. Even with my recent upgrades the numbers just don't add up. I wonder if I would be able to get it right if PIXAL was still in my head. I conclude that some factors in this world must be outside the grasp to logic. Like my own power. I have vague memories of how I got them, but there is no logic I can make of that either. Just that it happened.
I see dust in the distance from a car approaching. It lifts my emotion readout a bit. Claire is good to have around. It is nice with an outside perspective on thing some times.

'Hi Zane! Hot day isn't it?'. Claire looks over at the puddle under the unshapely ice block which recently resembled Cole, but she does not comment on it.
'Ready for a bit of housekeeping? I know I am!'.
Claire seems to love coming here. Even though her job is the mundane one of cleaning the temple and doing small repairs, she always seems so joyous. She has a history with the temple. Back when it was still haunted by the ghost of Sensei Yang, her father was the caretaker. It had become a tourist attraction back then. He did not do a very good job. Claire has told me, that he fully believed in the stories about it being haunted, and he was deadly afraid of it. That is the reason the temple was in such disrepair back then. He would not go near it and mostly tended to the grounds around it. Claire on the other hand is not afraid of anything. She often made her way inside to explore the staircases, studies, corridors, dojo, atelier and such. I suspect she

knows the interior lay-out better than we do. She seems very eager today.

'Can we do the a sweep of the Temple?!?! Please!!!'.
I was expecting her to say that. I am not comfortable with it. Summoning my elemental dragon has become increasingly difficult these past few months. It takes a much higher level of concentration now. The others have felt it too. I've run simulations on the scenario that it has something to do with Master Wu going missing, but the feedback offers no explanation. Maybe it is another one of those things that cannot be defined within the parameters of logic.
I find myself saying *'Yes Claire! A sweep could prove most satisfactory'*. It contradicts my coding to endanger another being unnecessarily. I shall strain myself to make it safe.

It is very interesting to observe Claire as we take to the skies on my Ice dragon. I focus on the dragon, but it is hard to ignore the pure and unhinged joy she expresses. Our lives have become lives of duty and responsibility. Claire is not burdened by that. I admire and envy her. I find myself enjoying the few sweeps of the temple while Claire waves enthusiastically at Misako feeding the koi in the pond.
As we set down Claire wastes no time. She loves that temple, and the fact that it is now floating and in pristine condition is just another plus for her. She seems to be bit disappointed that it is no longer haunted though. She chuckles as she talks about how that was the thing that made his father keep his distance. Now that it's not haunted, keeping the grounds shouldn't be a problem for him. Except he is also afraid of heights. It was Lloyd's idea to get some help to take care of the temple. We need to stay focused on our search for Wu. We will soon be leaving again. I guess Jay will need a new search partner. Misako perhaps. She greets Claire with a warm hug.
'Great Wohira this place looks great! Less than a year ago it was a complete mess. An AWESOME complete mess but look at it now! Dad had his hands full keeping looters away, but with this whole airborne thing you guys've got going I

guess you don't have that problem anymore!'.
Misako chuckles. *'Not at all. Having the best ninja in all the land and some elemental dragons around also helps!'.*
We have not told Misako about our fading ability to summon our dragons. The loss of Master Wu has taken its toll on her. She is as driven as any of us to find him. She puts up a brave face, but I can feel her pain. She pins up photos everywhere. Not just of him but also us, our friends and those we care about. Even on the Bounty. I have not observed such behaviour in her before. With loss comes reflection and appreciation of the good things in your past. My processors have no problem finding the logic in that.

'Follow my lead!' Jerahn tells me as his eyes scan over the street, making sure we are unseen. I do not like doing this, betraying Seliel's hospitality. But after all, this is the reason why Yang sent me here, so I hide away my guilt for later.
He scans the street to make sure the coast is clear, and then he Airjitzus to the roof of one of the tallest buildings. I follow. When I join him, he is already removing some wooden boards from the side of the wall.
'I did not come by this place by chance. I was following a lead.'. His voice is intense. *'Come inside. No one knows this room exists'.*
It is dark inside. Only the light of the rift on my head illuminates the room. I see that Jerahn has a reason to be secretive. The place is filled with ornate artefacts, vases, weapons, idols and paintings. He turns to me and looks me straight in the eyes.
'*All this stuff is authentic Edo period.' Those villages where the building materials and this stuff comes from. They were old but they were in fine shape. They were abandoned. No one knows why, when and what happened to the people who lived there. They just left ... or were taken. No one knows!'.*
Jerahn swallows hard. *'And that's not all. There is not only stuff here from those towns. There is something else. Something I made years ago. Back when I was still a ghost.*
He points to the corner of the room. And there, bathed in the light of my rift is a portrait of Master Yang.

Way of the Departed

CHAPTER 7

It makes sense now. At least that nonsensical and elusive ghost sense that I've gotten so used to dealing with. Here is a painting of Master Yang looking back at me. It is different from the one at the museum and the ones still hanging in our temple. This one is more crudely painted.
'Master Yang didn't just teach us Airjitzu.' Jerahn says. *'It was a whole philosophy. A lot of pieces that needed to fit together. Patience, focus, meditation and such. Master Yang combined the lessons in various different ways. He had us sit together in the atelier hours on end painting him while he was in some meditative trance. In the beginning I found the whole thing stupid and vain on his part.'*
Jerahn has a guilty look on his face saying that.
'But eventually I got it. He was teaching us tolerance, focus and patience. Realizing that, the obstacles moved out of the way, and my path to Airjitzu became much easier.'
I ask him about how the painting got here. He shrugs.
'We saw a LOT of lootings during our time as ghosts in the temple. Thieves would come at any time during the day or night. I admit we had some fun scaring them off. Even captives need some fun. But also there was a purpose to it ... getting them out before the clock struck and all. We did those guys a favour! You know all too well what happens. Some thieves made it away with some of those Edo period artefacts they came for though. I guess that how the painting ended up here.' He laughs.
'Someone must have thought my strokes were authentic Edo period artwork. Can you believe that?!? I think I should feel proud.'
I am transfixed on Master Yang's stern look on the painting. So that's one question answered: That's how he could reach out to this place and knew where I should go. But the answer just opens up new ones. First one that comes to mind is regarding Jerahn's dream. He seems almost relieved by my question. He has been holding it in for too long. When he starts to tell me, it sends a shiver down my spine.
'It's cold. It's almost like I'm dead. I am in some Ice labyrinth. I know it's just a dream because I am with you guys. The

Ninja I mean. And since I don't know you guys and I am in a place which I don't know, I figure that it's just a dream. Still feels pretty real though. You guys are staring at the ice, so I figure I should do that too. But I get distracted by a voice. It's a young voice filled with determination, but also conflict and pain. I don't know who he is talking to and sometimes it even seems like he is arguing with himself in two different voices. I find my way around the ice wall to check it out. It's the green ninja ... but his voice sounds different ... like it comes from a different place and he looks pale. He shakes his head violently, put on his cowl and gets out his weapons. I see you on the other side of the ice. He lunges at you, slashes the ice and cleaves your head in two ... I am paralyzed. Your scar hangs in mid air convulsing. It's the big green glow of light that wakes me up.'

He looks at me like I can offer some explanation.

I look back at the painting and decide to play my cards close to the chest. This is getting complicated and I am not as smart as Zane. Jerahn and I both have secrets. We are both here because of Seliel and Nom's kindness, but we are not being honest. Can we be honest? What is going on here in Nom? The town being mended using materials from Edo period cities. Cities whose houses are being re-purposed because they were uninhabited. People have gone missing, and now this place is being ornamented by their cities' remains. Does Seliel know about that? Does her father? He is the mayor after all! This is getting too complicated and I need time to think. As if reading my mind Jerahn continues.

'You know how I found out about those cities? Some of the others. Other students I mean. Some returned to their villages, only to find their homes torn down and their families missing. They are out there searching for them right now. And I'm here decorating Nom with THEIR homes ... how messed up is that?!?! I have been talking ...'

'JERAHN!!! WHERE ARE YOU?!!!' Seliel's irate call echoes from below. Jerahn looks to me as if I can offer some advice.

'You cannot avoid her for long. Go meet her and say we will all talk tonight ... and tell her to bring her father too. I will

have a look at this stuff and board up. Don't worry about it.' Jerahn gives me a grateful nod and exits.

I am alone again, but know I won't be for long. Staring into the eyes of the painting brings me in a dreamlike trance that I have experience only once before. Master Yang starts to move and it's time to get some answers.
It is odd to see him animate in the picture. It seems like he can't quite adjust to Jerahn's brush strokes, and the situation becomes somewhat awkward. He finally gets comfortable or just ignores it. Then he focuses his attention on me.
'Cole my boy ... I am ... glad that you have found this painting and that we have this opportunity to talk. Have you found anyone ... how are your dreams?' He looks worried at the rift on my head. I quickly fill him in. As I talk about Jerahn his spirit seems uplifted, but as I get to the Edo era towns he looks shocked. I finish. He doesn't speak for a while, but when he does, it is with great concern and seriousness.
'The Edo period was a time know for great magic. The Edo magic was practiced by many sorcerers in the southern parts of Ninjago. Most used it for good, but the magic was not safe. It was unpredictable and disruptive. Easy to use but not hard to get wrong. I don't know much about since it was mostly lost. I did some studying on the subject when I firs t moved into the temple, but not many texts exist. I did find out that Edo is ancient ninjargan for earth. Edo magic drew upon the power of the earth. The Edo Sorcerers needed to draw up and focus the power. That is the origin of the Edo era villages. Their towers and spires, just like the Temple of Airjitzu, were designed to channel and concentrate the power of the earth so the sorcerers had easy access to it and could draw upon it when they needed to. But as I said; Edo magic often produced unpredictable results. It wiped itself and its users out. But now it seems that Nom is bringing all of these Edo relics here. An enormous amount of Edo power will build up. Who can be behind this?' Master Yang silences.
Sorcerer? I know only one sorcerer. The last time I saw him I was still a ghost and so was he. On the Dark Island.

Way of the Departed

CHAPTER 8

'I need to be patient. It has become my cursed mantra during my residency here. I have been patient all of my life, so why should death be any different for me? I have spent most of my life as a follower. In death I have attempted to come into my own. I knew what remained of me had limited time in Ninjago so I had to seek new battlegrounds. My Realm of Shadows endeavour was not exactly a success. The Ninja managed to bring the Dragon of Light before me. Later I failed to acquire the Teapot of Tyrahn in time and left for the Dark Island. But even there the Ninja thwarted my plans ... or rather my old rival's brother thwarted me with their father's golden hulk of an atrocity. I hate light ... it seems to be my bane. Even Garmadon had embraced the light and become a goody-two-shoes when he cheated me into the Cursed Realm. I should have know better. Even when he was younger he was a cheat. Using Spinjutzu to rob me of my rightful title of Lord. Dishonourable!
I escaped and now I am here. Being patient ... King of my own Realm ... Sitting on a throne made from the bone of dead men. King of the Underworld.
This place was ripe for a take over. These plain Skullkin are sheep with no direction. They are broken warriors disgraced in battle without redemption or honour. They are creatures with no aspiration and direction and yearn to be governed and be shown a way. And do I have plans of them!
But for now I must remain patient. The plan is nearing its conclusion: The Elemental Master in my employ has played its part for now. It will only be a matter of time before my hapless pawn in Nom finishes his misguided vanity project. The boy with the rift has been lured into place, and soon when enough Edo power has built up, I will rip open that rift and put my prisoners and my undead warriors to good use. Patience ...

'Clouse?' *Yang ponders.* I have just told him everything about our previous encounters with the sorcerer.
'I know about Chen ... I did invite him back on the Day of the Departed.' He looks ashamed saying that. 'But I never

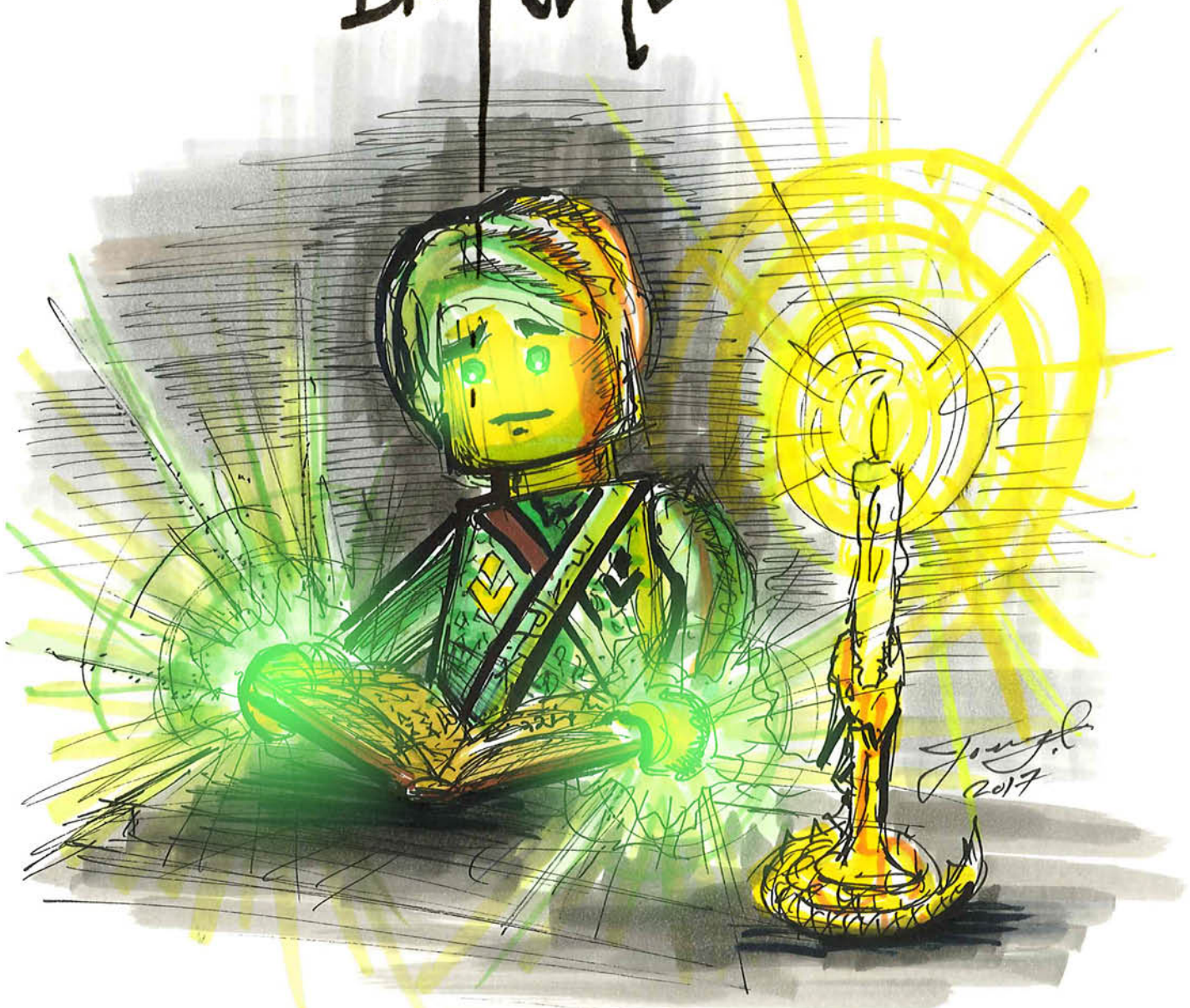
knew he had an associate who was a sorcerer. And an Edo Sorcerer at that. I guess some of the more stable incantations was documented in that book of his. You were wise to burn it.'
'He is a ghost now, but he can still do magic.' I tell him. 'On the Dark Island he used dark matter to strengthen his magic. But Master Wu stopped him. We saw him be pulled through some vortex and we have no idea what happened to him. Do you really think this can have something to do with him?' I ask though I already kind of know what the reply will be.
'We must assume the worst. I doubt you will find him in this realm though ... at least yet. Ghosts can only sustain themselves for so long in Ninjago without being attached to a physical vessel, but you know this. But the mere thought that there is still an Edo Sorcerer out there somewhere is indeed troubling. I must ponder this.' It looks like he is about to withdraw from the painting, but I stop him. In need to know about Jerahn's dream.
'It is not clear yet.' He shakes his head. *'But there are three things you, Jerahn and Morro have in common. You have all been touched by death, and each of you in your own way have been cursed. Jerahn and Morro have been freed from theirs'. Maybe you should take some hope and consolation in that'.* I remind him that Morro had to die to be completely free himself of his. Sensei Yang looks troubled as he fades.

I board up the secret room as I think hard about what Yang just told me, and how much of this I need to share with Seliel and her dad. I am in two minds about how much I can trust them. My mind is racing with connections. Me, Jerahn, Morro ... even Clouse? We have all been ghosts. And then there is the whole Edo, earth, rift, buildings and me connection. Is the rift on my forehead opening because I, Master of Earth, have been around buildings which draw on the Edo power? Here I am in a new Edo hotspot of Ninjago! Maybe I should just get as far away from here and the Temple of Airjitzu. That all of a sudden seems like a very compelling solution to try out. But then I think of Jerahn, the students, their neighbours and families who may need help. A ninja never

leaves a ninja behind ... I remember that much, Master!
I make my way down the building discreetly. As I walk though the town I hear a very familiar voice from a nearby window. My father and his Royal Blacksmiths are singing '*Revenge will be Mine*' from a radio while an old woman cleaning dishes hums along. It became quite a hit after the Stone Warriors' attack on the Day of the Departed. Gayle Gossip and her news crew were broadcasting from the concert, and because of all of the exposure and reruns the event got in the days after, my dad and his band decided to re-release the song. It was never a big hit, but now it has really taken off. It would be nice to see him happy again. Like real happiness. Money is not the answer, but maybe if they make a nice profit off it, he may be able to relax a bit and find some new creative spark. I hope so. It's really what drives him. I think of Jay and how cheerful he seems. He was born in a junk yard and has poor parents ... so I guess money and happiness aren't really connected. Lately he has been trying to convince me that with Lightning Powers also come Lightning Foresight. '*Today a letter will arrive! A letter that will grant me a great fortune! The Lightning Foresight has sparked the knowledge in my mind!"* he has dramatically proclaimed a number of times. And then he has almost overpowered the mail-man to get the mail yelling *'WHY ARE YOU HOLDING OUT ON ME!!! HAND IT OVER ALREADY!!!'* ... Poor mail-man.
But back to the issue a hand: What do I tell Seliel and her father?!?! I guess I have a few hours to work it out. I take in the Edo era buildings. They seem like a threat to me now. Like an enemy waiting to strike. The rift on my head hurts and I hear the voice from the dream call my name again. I convince myself that I just imagine it, but it seems all too real. I recognize the voice, but it's not the tender voice from my childhood anymore. It is filled with sorrow and desperation ... The kind of tone you speak to one who is beyond your reach.

As Cole walks down the street, a pair of eyes watch him. Or rather an empty pair of eye-sockets on a creature that has been promised by its new King soon to be whole again....

Way of the Departed



CHAPTER 9

The Skullkin watching Cole fights the urge to attack.
It recognizes him from previous encounters, and what little remains of its soul holds a grudge. But it has specific orders from the new King to only observe and report. The promise to soon become something more echoes in its mostly empty skull. The faint memory, regret and embarrassment of his cowardice from back when he was still a he is ever present. The King has promised to take that away. For all of them. Soon this torment that has lasted for so long will go away. The new King has promised. He has told them to be patient.

I feel like I am being watched, but I brush it off. I need to clear my head before I face Seliel and her father. Some tea will help.
The young girl who pours my tea in the darkened tea room studies my scar curiously but asks no questions. I dig deep for some guidance. As run trough Master Wu's lessons, I feel equal measures of gratitude, sorrow and encouragement. We learned so much from him, yet there was always more than he told us. Like some truth we weren't ready for.
When I was three years old, my mother told me that the moon was made of green cheese. That seemed like a pretty good explanation at the time, and I trusted her completely. When I was six a history teacher in school told me that the storm god Wohira created the mood. She crystallized a bolt of lightning and raised it far above Ninjago to light our way in the dark. I was dumbstruck. Why had mother lied to me? It took me a few minutes before I realized that she hadn't. She had just given me the truth that would make most sense for me at the time. The idea of a god like being would have sent my childlike mind into a spiralling loop of confusion.
A few days later another teacher told me that the moon was a giant cold rock thousands of miles away, suspended in an infinite void of airless darkness. Did they lie to me intentionally or were they merely offering options to make up my own mind about something which no-one has a definite answer to?
The tea warms me as I realize that my mind has wandered off topic. I am supposed to figure out what to tell the mayor

later today. I dig for a lesson from Master Wu again. I wonder what he thinks of the moon. Did his father, the First Spinjitzu Master create it? Does he know for sure? What other truths has he been keeping from us?

It's embarrassing. It's happened several times now. I am surprised none of the others have noticed it yet. It's not easy to maintain your dignity, giving out instructions when your voice suddenly betrays you. The whole situation is weird to me. Here I am, youngest of the ninja, fighting to keep my confidence and show leadership. And then my voice starts to break. I know my mother has noticed. She keeps reassuring me that I am doing a great job as Sensei, but I guess that's just what moms do; Tell you what you need to hear at the time. I guess something is working though. The others have definitely developed their Spinjitzu skills over the fast few months. Searching for Master Wu rather than fighting an enemy has presented us with some new opportunities and given us a different routine. We are less distracted by events beyond our control, and more focused at the task at hand. Even though I am really connecting with my powers, my ability to summon my elemental dragon is fading. My eyes are changing and now my voice is changing too. I am getting stronger and weaker. Puberty or something greater?
I check to see if the coast is clear. It's great to have Claire around, but it's also clear to me that she is more eager to explore the temple than she is to clean it. Hiring her was my idea and I don't regret that, I just need to be more careful now. I found the Book of Spinjitzu in my room shortly after Master Wu got lost in time. I was only very lightly concealed, so it is clear that he intended me to find it. When I first opened it, there were several blank pages, but as I touched the book my power connected with it, and texts appeared. Text written by Master Wu, but not with his normal delicate penmanship. This was written by a trembling hand.

I am in a weakened state as I write you this nephew.
Having been struck by Acronix's time punch, I am rapidly

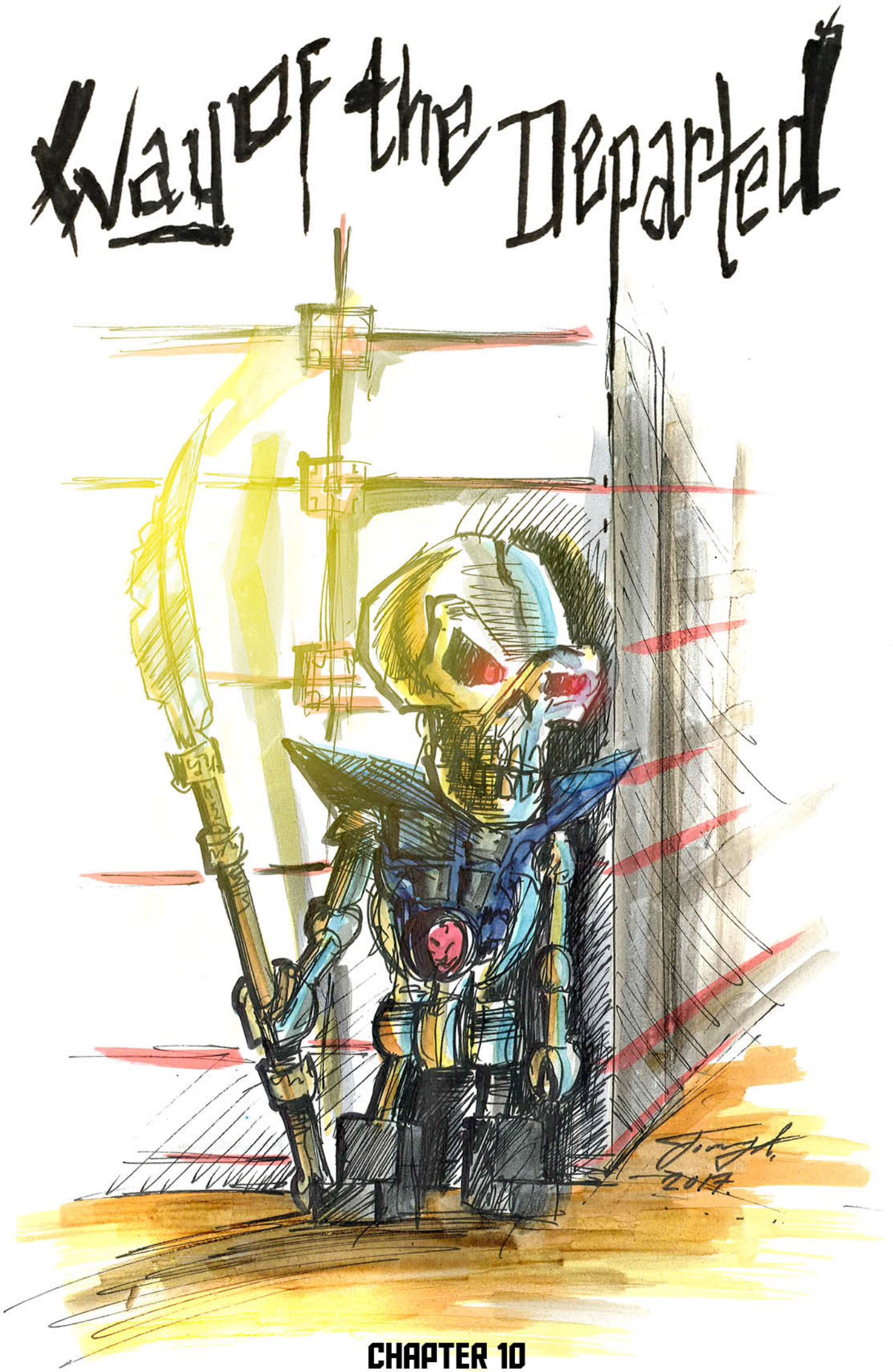
aging. I will fall in time as any warrior will and I feel my remaining time here in Ninjago is short. You will be the one to carry on the lessons of Spinjitzu. These words are meant for your eyes only. May your power guide you to the greater truth.

As I leafed through the pages more texts and even drawings appeared. I have read the whole book from cover to cover as dozen times over now. Each time there seems to be something new, or something I somehow missed. It's like the book will only reveal certain passages when you need it. I wonder what new knowledge it holds for me today.

The Elemental Masters *have long been the guardians of Ninjago. Millennia ago, my father bestowed their ancestors with the power of all of the elements. Is this something he told me, or something I dreamt up myself? It's blurry sometimes. Many times and for many generations have they joined together in the defence of Ninjago.*
40 years ago, your father and myself led the alliance of the Elemental Masters. It was Ninjago's last stand against Master Chen, his dark sorcerer Clouse and the Serpentine. Chen fooled us all into playing his game of war. He cleverly used manipulation, deception, dark magic and the hypnotic powers of the snakes to turn Elemental Masters against each others. But we won! Or so we thought
Shortly after our victory we faced a new enemy ... two of our own: Krux and Acronix - The Hands of Time.
It is only just now, aging in bed, that I have put together the full puzzle. Master Chen, when he realized his defeat was imminent, had Clouse use dark magic to motivate an idea in Krux and Acronix; That their elemental powers were superior, and that they could win the fight Chen had just lost. He let them know of a secret nest of eggs from the Great Devourer. After 40 years of preparation they put the eggs to evil use: The Vermilion. You know the rest.

The greater truth. Those words stick in my mind. Cole used the same words in the letter he left behind. What is he up to?

Way of the Departed



CHAPTER 10

I take a good look at Nom as I make my way to the city hall. Sounds of hammering echo though the streets. Dozen of carpenters are working on mending the buildings. The towers and their metal ornaments gleam in the setting sunlight, but knowing what I know now, I get an eerie feeling like nails are being hammered into a coffin.

Jerahn, Seliel and her father are waiting for me as I step into the city hall. The atmosphere is tense, but the Mayor still insists on certain formalities, greeting me warmly and thanks me again for the help during the Nindroid crisis. Jerahn shifts uncomfortably and impatiently. Seliel is stone faced. It is not clear how much he has told her father, but he certainly knows something. He is trying hard not to look at my scar (rift) which does not feel natural.
I end up telling him everything except exactly how I got all of this information. Seliel is concerned about 'rogue magic' and to mention a conversation with a ghost on a painting would not help. I do everything I can to incriminate Jerahn as little as possible, and as I talk them through it, he seems relieved. The Mayor does not. I am trying hard to read his reactions. How much of this is new to him and what does he actually know? I try to be as diplomatic as possible, but it is obvious that he takes some of it as an accusation. Also it seems he has not been completely oblivious to the fact that the Edo era villages were abandoned under suspicious circumstances. But he lets me finish before he erupts.
'WHAT IS THIS!?! DO I LOOK LIKE A CROOK!?! I am the MAYOR of this fine town. I have RESPONSIBILITIES! The BOARD OF COMMERCE expect this town to become a CITY! To PROSPER and GROW! Our dealings with Borg Industries are not enough! We DO NOT need and image of INDUSTRY! We need CHARM ... a DISTINCT PROFILE .... AUTHENTICITY ... We need TOURISM!' He breathes hard as he finishes his tirade. Then he deflates. He feels like man who has been under too much stress for too long, and has been led to do things he has not been completely confident with. Seliel and Jerahn look surprised as he changes from

anger to fatigue.
'I should have never trusted that man. Why did I trust such a strange man?' he mutters to himself.
'What man father?' Seliel asks.
The Mayor sighs deeply.
'*He came by here 5 months ago. I have not seen him before or since. He had claims on these old plots of land with abandoned decaying villages on them. He spoke highly of their houses' value, their historic significance and their precious rare metal ornamentation. He wanted to make sure the they would not wither and be lost to time. He gave me the claims and a map for nothing. I only had to promise I would honour his wishes and preserve the buildings. He was going to leave for a while. I had to ask him several times if I had understood his proposal right. He seemed sincere but he spoke in a very strange and broken accent. When I asked he was going he said Metalonia.'*
I feel like I am being hit by my own hammer again.
'What ... what did he look like? I ask. But I already know the answer to that.
'*Strange. He looked strange ... He had these big metal hands, a beard and wore a heavy helmet. A big man.'*
Seliel can tell that I am shaken. I can feel it. I was expecting that it was Clouse who had somehow found a way to fool the Mayor. But Karloff?!?! He is our friend now. Last time I saw him, Jay and I had just freed him and the blacksmiths from Krux and Acronix's swamp facility. Jay complained for days about being sore from his big iron grip hug. Why would he have turned. Why would he be involved in this?
I tell them about Karloff. The Mayor has been duped and I have no reservation to trust him now. He needs my help. This whole town does. Suddenly the Mayor panics.
'I need to stop this ... I need to ...' He bolts past me out of the city hall. Seconds after there is turmoil in the street. We follow. The Mayor is screaming at the carpenters to stop their work. People are peeking out of their houses and start gathering in the street. Several noble looking men, the board of commerce I assume, march at the Mayor. The carpenters

start to climb down from the buildings.

From the edge of town, the Skullkin lookout swallows hard. Or whatever makes it up for swallowing hard in a Skullkin. The new King will not like this. No one notices the rattling of bones as it departs and makes its way into the forest where a grotesque skull-like vehicle on huge wheels awaits. As it reaches maximum speed, a blinding purple flash ejects it from Ninjago for its travel to the realm known as the Underworld.

Things are heating up inside the city hall. The board of commerce demands to know what is going on and why the Mayor has halted the construction. Apparently some distinguished delegates and potential investors will arrive in Nom is a few short days. They want the buildings to be completed so the town will look its best. Seliel signals me and Jerahn and we slip away. I feel bad for the Mayor. I have never understood politics and even the governments of Ninjago are unclear to me. Seliel is still pretty intense, but now her focus is directed at the bigger picture.
She looks up at the Edo towers where the last bit of sunlight has given away to darkness and the rising moon. She sighs. We fill her in on EVERYTHING ... details of the dreams, Master Yang's painting, Jerahn's past, Karloff and Clouse. If Clouse is behind this, he has at least one big advantage: When Wu fought his ghost on the Dark Island and he escaped through the vortex, we have no idea where he escaped to. And he has obviously had both the time and resources to plan this out. We have no idea what we are up against. The missing Edo-villagers worries me. We have seen Clouse use dark magic to turn people against each other before. Is this what has happened to Karloff? It's a dreadful thought, but I kind of hope so. The thought that he would turn against us by his own free will is worse.

In the Underworld a grotesque skull-like vehicle arrives in a purple flash.

CHAPTER 11

I will soon be dreaming the dream again. I am sleeping, but my awake thoughts keep popping in. It is not exactly easy falling asleep knowing what I know now. I have to sleep with a blindfold tonight. The light from the rift illuminates the room too much. Also my dream has changed. I have an external view of myself this time, like I am a floating spirit watching. I cannot move and just watch as Morro breaks through the ice and cleaves my head. My headless body drops to the ground and the rift hangs in mid air convulsing. Morro doesn't seem surprised. This was the expected outcome for him. He stares deep into the Departed Realm, then slowly raises his arm and reaches in. In a bright green flash he is violently pushed back. Inside the Rift the faces float by in the twisting maelstrom of green. Morro's voice has a hollow pained feel as he snaps angrily at them.
'Why do you fight it? Why are you so complacent? You could be free like I am! Just pass through and hook on to something! Be free! What's so good about where you are now?
There is something truly desperate about Morro's voice. It dawns on me, that he is not really angry that the ones in the Departed Realm won't pass over. He is angry that the Departed Realm won't accept him. He advances on the rift again ...

The Skullkin crashes against the wall. The clacking of bone echoes through the Underworld and the other Skullkin cower as bones scatter across the blackened floor. The sickly green ghostly glow from the Edo sorcerer who has risen from his throne mixes with the blue vapours emitting from his clenched hands.
'WORK IN NOM HAS STOPPED?!? WHY?!? SPEAK!'

The awkward silence that followed seemed to last forever. The Skullkin skull found it immensely hard to speak having been separated 20 feet from its lower jaw. It wasn't until another Skullkin nervously fumbling managed to put the jaw back in its place, that the silence was broken.
'Please exalted SkullKing of the Underworld. I am just a messenger. Bu...bu...bu...but it would seem that the Mayor

knows there is some fishy going on. Maybe he has figured out the true purpose of the structures. I think he...'
Another blue blast sent the skull flying across the plateau. Baby bone spiders fled into cracks in the ground, as it settled dangerously close to the edge, a steep drop with red hot lava bubbling below. The Skullkin would have swallowed hard had it still had a throat.
'Have I asked you to THINK?!? How can I rule Ninjago if there isn't enough Edo power to liberate me from this wretched place?!?
Clouse fumed, then regained his composure. His piercing eyes scanned the legion of Skullkin which stood paralyzed by fear before him. Had he revealed too much? No! These warriors had long ago given up their ability to question authority. Clouse had spent some of his younger years studying the great battles of the past. Samukai had been a mighty warlord early in his career, but he had quickly lost his way in his greedy conquest for riches, land and power. Yet there were no records or desertions or mutinies despite all the atrocities he and his merciless armies caused. Clouse respected that. A great leader should inspire blind loyalty and fear in his followers. And have the resolve to do ANYTHING to carry the ambition forward. He had always wondered what Samukai had done to bring this strange fate on himself and his men. The history books mentioned how the flesh was ripped from their bones and how their armour and weapons dropped to the ground as their skeletons ceased to exist in Ninjago. But even his attempts ... A KING'S ORDERS TO HIS SUBJECTS had failed to get any of the Skullkin to decipher this riddle for him. So deep ran their shame and regret. Clouse sat back down on his throne and waved his hand dismissively. '*Put him back together and send him back to Ninjago. And bring this to the warden!'* He scribbled some fast instructions on a crumbling piece of parchment, and called over the newly rebuilt Skullkin, who nervously approached his King with new found respect. His respect was no longer based on the promise of becoming something more. But of fear.

I rip the blindfold from my eyes. I am wide awake and the rift burns painfully on my face. As my eyes adjust to the green

light reflected on the ceiling, I summarize the new information from the dream. How much of it is to be trusted, and how much has been added by my own imagination? No one in Ninjago seems to know much about the Departed Realm, yet my dream suggests that the Departed have no desire to leave it. Truth or wishful thinking? Not sure. Still I take some comfort in that.
As I step out into the sunlight, the sounds of birds chirping greet me. No sounds of hammering. I wonder what the mayor has argued to the board of commerce, but it has clearly worked. Jerahn is waiting for me outside with a most concerned look on his face.
'My scar has disappeared again! It just disappeared!' he blurts out at me as he brushes his hair away from the forehead.
'Yes?' I reply. Of course this is strange and last we spoke of it, we were interrupted by Seliel, so I don't have the full picture.
'Normally they fade away slowly. But this time it just disappeared! I was talking with Alyce and all of a sudden...".
I cut him off. *'Who's Alyce?'*
'Alyce she's ... oh right! I haven't told you. Alyce is one of the others ... Yang's students, you know. I was talking to her. She was out tracking the people from her village that had gone missing and...'
I look around. The street is empty. '*Where is she?'*
Jerahn takes a deep breath as he realizes he is getting ahead of himself.
'It's how we keep in touch. The scars. They come and go, but when they're there we can communicate ... talk. Like a voice in our heads. Lately I haven't been able so communicate with the others, but now I can't reach Alyce either. We were 'talking'. She said she had come across something. A camp or something. She was sneaking in to investigate. She hushed me. But then all of a sudden our connection was lost. I could feel her confusion and fear, but then I felt a sting and then nothing. When I checked my scar had gone. WE GOTTA HELP HER! SOMETHING HAS HAPPENED TO HER!'
Jerahn is wide eyed and panicky. When I ask him if he has any idea where she is, he drops to his knees and shakes his head sobbing.
I know how it feels to be this lost. I have been ... several times.

Way of the Departed

CHAPTER 12

Earlier that morning...

I look at the morning sun rising above the steep cliffs. Its rays break through the thick mist. My head hurts inside. I look down at my reflection in the puddle again. The water is muddy and it is hard to make out. It is like my brain. Ever since I fought in Chen's tournament, my thoughts have been hazy. I don't recognize myself. The wind ripples the water and I can only make out small parts of my reflection at a time. It looks like I am drifting apart. My hands are big, or maybe it is just the distortion from the puddle. They look heavy but they don't feel heavy. When I speak, the words that come from my mouth sound crude and primitive. My voice is deep and echoes in my skull. I don't feel like myself. I am surrounded by Skullkin. I would not normally be around such creatures. There are around 20 of them. They call me The Warden and seem to believe I am the leader of this camp. There are a lot of people in cages here. I don't remember how or why they came here or why they are captive, but if I am the warden, it must be my responsibility to keep them here. The reflection in the puddle stares back at me.
The water is muddy and it is hard to make out. It is like my brain. Ever since I fought in Chen's tournament my thoughts have been hazy. I don't recognize myself. I look up at the morning sun rising above the steep cliffs. Its rays break through the thick mist. My head hurts inside. If only I could remember a little better...

I hush ... Immediately Jerahn asks what's up. We have some sort of connection now. My scar hurts when we communicate. It helps me to speak my thoughts out loud when we 'talk', but right now I need to be quiet. I just heard a rattling sound from somewhere. It is hard to be sure which direction it came from with all the steep cliff sides ricocheting the sounds back and forth. I have been watching the camp of crudely made bamboo cages for an hour now trying to figure out some game plan. There seems to be just the one way in. This is where all the people have gone. The people from my village are most likely here too. Jerahn keeps calling my name in my head, but I block him out. I need to focus and dodge behind a rock. Two skeletons

in armour and armed to the teeth walk in from behind. They look very alert. I have heard about Skullkin before and there has even been some sightings these last few years, but I always thought they were just myth. Yet here they are. They speak with guttural croaking voices which chill my bones.

'I'm sure I heard something ... keep your eyes peeled!'

'Errr... I don't have any eyes! And how does 'keeping my eyes peeled' help if we are looking for a sound? You can't see a sound! What would it look like?'

'No you Craniac! ... I mean SOMETHING must have made that sound. Sounded like talking.'

'But how can a Something talk? And why would a Something talk to itself. Maybe we are looking for two Somethings then!'

'... Shut up!!! Keep looking!'

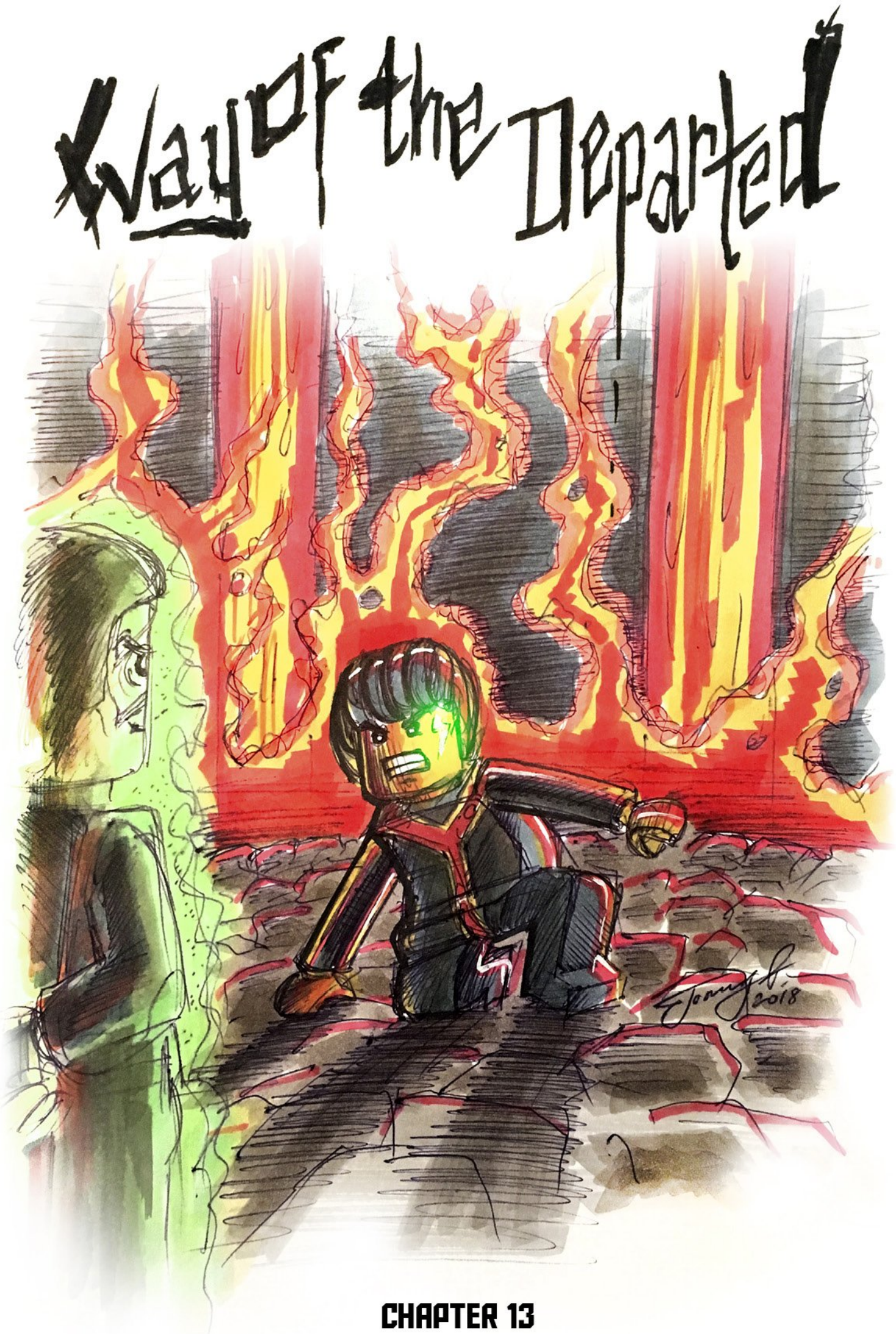
The two Skullkin are getting too close for comfort. There is nowhere to retreat to except between the cliffs. Right into the camp. It's a risk, but one I need to take. I was going to watch for a little while longer, and then make my move at nightfall. But now I have to improvise. It feels like I am walking right into a trap. There are other Skullkin guards in here. Not too many, but still more than I can take on. As much as I hate what Yang did to us, at least the first few years at the Temple of Airjitzu taught me patience. Maybe I can take them down one by one. The camp is completely boxed in by the tall cliff sides. If I get spotted, I doubt I will even be able to Airjitzu my way out of here. This 'mission' has changed from being a stake-out mission, to a survival- and maybe even rescue-mission in just a few minutes. I step around some puddles and keep out of sight.

Two Skullkin are arguing loudly over a game of dice. Judging from these two and the two guards by the entrance, they aren't too smart. That's good! Maybe a clever distraction will do?

I sneak closer to the cages. I do not see let the prisoners see me. There are many. I don't know how many, but I guess at least three hundred. They look unhappy and dirty but well fed. This surprises me. Some of them have been missing for more than 4 months now. It does not seem natural for these Skullkin captors to care much about these people or even food. I wonder what their purpose is? There seems to be more to it than just

keeping them. One special cage catches my eye. It is small and differently built than the others. I spot my fellow students from the Temple of Airjitzu ... 4 of them. If I can get them out, we may have a fighting chance against the Skullkin Guards.
This is now officially a rescue mission!
I check that the coast is clear and dash towards the ...
... I am blasted backwards and slam against a rock wall hard. Everything turns purple. My head spin from the blow and I struggle to focus my eyes. Right in front of me a bizarre truck made from bone has appeared out of nowhere. Or rather it has arrived though a swirling purple blur of sparkles.
Everything is a blur, but I make out a Skullkin which exits the vehicle as others gather around it. They speak briefly and one of the others run off only to return moments later with a large man clad in metal and with huge hands ... probably the leader of the camp. My eye sight is starting to become less blurry. He is handed a letter which he handles clumsily. It looks like he is just about to read it, but then he looks directly at me and yell.
I get on my feet, but the Skullkin are already all over me. I manage to knock a few over and buy myself a few seconds. Others attack and I dodge. Fighting is not an option. There are too many. Another dodge. I run towards the cage with the Airjitzu students. If I manage to free them, fighting may still be a option. But the big guy has blocked my path to the cage. My friends have seen me now and call out to me. The big guy charge, but I Airjitzu over him and he shatters two or three of the Skullkin who were on my tail ... things are looking up! But as I reach the cage my heart drops. There is no way I will able to break the thick bamboo bars or massive lock. I tell my friends to retreat into the cage. I can't break it, but I know who can! The big guy comes at me again. I roll out of the way and his huge metal fist misses my head by an inch. No sound of breaking bamboo. A high pitched, pained cry. I get on my feet. The cage is intact. My attacker is rubbing his hand in pain. I am surrounded. I look up ... Steep rock walls. Airjitzu isn't flight. No way I will be able to escape. The fist comes at me again ... it feels warm as it connects with my chin ... not quite as hard as I expected ... I have failed you Jerahn ... Another blow connects ... Blackness...

Way of the Departed



CHAPTER 13

This day has been ... interesting. This is my third day in Nom. Nothing much has happened really. I have spent most of the day trying to calm Jerahn down. To snap him out of his sobbing over losing his connection to Alyce, I took him for a hike in the outskirts and forests around the town. If something will go down, I want to know what I am dealing with and from which way we may get ambushed. It's all speculation at this point, but if Clouse and Karloff is in cahoots, I doubt that they are alone on it. There's got to be some sort for army behind them. The bad news is, that Nom can be attacked from anywhere. Hills to the south, forests to the north and east and barren rock landscapes to the west. I should call the others but I don't. My scar (rift) is starting to hurt a lot worse now. I have a gateway to the Departed Realm on my face! What will happen if it rips open? I cannot put my friends in that kind of jeopardy. If I warn them, they will come running to help. They always do, so I won't take that risk. When I get the chance I will speak with Master Yang again and tell him everything I know. Then, if I fail the people of Nom, he can reveal himself and tell them everything. It's the best I can come up with right now.

We were joined by Seliel and engaged in a pretty intense sparring session. Again dual purposes. I wanted to see what Jerahn was worth in a fight, and it would get his mind of Alyce and wear him down. Both Seliel and Jerahn are very capable. Jerahn has Airjitzu on his side. He tried to teach it to Seliel, but either he is a lousy teacher, or she doesn't have the knack for it. She has her own tricks though and caught me off guard several time ... Packs a punch too if you if she manages to blind side you. During a break she updated me on the situation at city hall. Her father cannot stall the board of commerce any longer. The foreign investors have sent a message that they will arrive in two days. Work on the buildings will commence again tomorrow morning and the completion will take less than a day. I consider taking my hammer to them during the night, but I do not share this idea with Seliel.

After another sparring session Jerahn excuses himself. He is completely worn down and quite frankly so am I. I can't even get myself to Airjitzu up the building to Yang's painting in the secret

room. Seliel is as concerned as I am about some imminent attack. She has a lot of bad memories from the Nindroid crisis days, and she wants to do everything she can to protect the town. We return to the woods to set up traps and early warning alarms, but really there is now way to guard ourselves against all scenarios. With ghostly Clouse, any plot is possible. Who says they will come on the ground, or if what ever army he has can even be stopped by physical objects? My scar (rift) hurts, my body hurts from the sparring and my head hurts from too much thinking. When I finally lay down, my head hardly hits the pillow before I fall asleep ... here comes the dream again...

WAKE UP COLE!!! The command is hard and unforgiving. I jump to my feet and try to focus. I recognize the place, but this is not where I fell asleep. Before me a Ferris wheel rotates lazily, but there is nothing cheerful about this place. It is an eerie dark with falls of lava feeding the bubbling rivers of magma below. I am in the Underworld! This is where we first faced Lord Garmadon and performed the Tornado of Creation. Looking up at it now, the outcome isn't exactly any kind of impressive. A Ferris wheel? I guess we were just younger and less experienced then. Still it was pretty good at the time. We had our elemental weapons back then. Except for the Sword of Fire. I believe Wu had it. But at least it was close. I doubt we would have able to pull off the Tornado of Creation without the actual weapons the First Spinjitzu Master used to create Ninjago.

'I have been looking forward to meeting you again.'

I turn to face Clouse. I know his voice well. I should be surprised but somehow I am not. He stands in front of me with his hands behind his back. He has that ghostly glow around him he did when we saw him on the Stixx surveillance photo, and later when we faced off against him on the Dark Island. He somehow made it out of the Cursed Realm before it's destruction, and he made his escape when Wu fought him in his father's golden mech. I guess this is where he went.

Clouse stares at me coldly. He seems mildly annoyed that I do not have some bigger reaction. I am weirded out but this, but I try to act cool. This is nothing but a dream. It's gotta be.

'You know we made that Ferris wheel? We should be charging you rent. And given that you are definitely saving because of the natural heating of this place, you should be able to afford it. Or do you need Chen to give you some allowance? Anyway ... can we get this dream over with? I have stuff to do.'
Clouse is fuming. All the better. Let's get to the point.
'THIS IS NO DREAM INSOLENT FOOL! This is the power of Edo magic. I have brought your feeble mind here. I...'
'It seems like a dream.' He is just about to speak, but I cut in again.
'Why are you in the Underworld? Are you playing with Skullkin now? Did you choose to go here yourself? Why would you ...?'
Clouse's eyes glow blue as his palms light up blue. I am hit by a shock wave and sent flying. Ow! I pick myself up. That actually hurt. Maybe this isn't all fun and games anyway. Clouse shoots me a sinister smile knowing he has made his point and has my attention.
'To answer your question: No. I am not here of my own choosing. I ended up here after you meddled in my affairs on the Dark Island. But I will not be here for long. Soon I shall return to Ninjago ... as shall my ancestors and those who followed them. I have all the vessels I need. There will soon be enough Edo power built up in Nom. The rift on your forehead will rip open and give those in the Departed Realm passage back into Ninjago. Two score Edo Sorcerers and hundreds of acolytes will pick the villagers they most see fit and join my reign in Ninjago's second Edo era. This land will bow in terror. It will be GLORIOUS!'
'...'
I am lost for words. This is bigger than I had figured. Much bigger. I need to stop it. I need to warn the others. I need to wake up and ... My thought are interrupted as Clouse smile widens.
'Oh you won't go anywhere Master of Earth. I have your mind remember? Your little idea of taking your hammer to the Edo buildings is not going to happen. You wake when I decide it's time to wake. And that won't happen until the Edo power is fully charged and my Skullkin march three hundred people right into Nom. Then you will wake just in time to feel you head split open. Congratulations Master of Earth ... You have doomed Ninjago by coming here!'

CHAPTER 14

I float to the window to watch the sun set. As its light disappears, Cole's room gets illuminated by my own green glow. I am worried and I feel guilty. I have not heard from Cole for a while. Several times during the day I have appeared in Jerahn's painting in Nom, hoping he would be there. I have watched the others here in the Temple of Airjitzu closely. They are clearly worried. I have considered revealing my presence to them and tell them what Cole has told me. They have a history with Clouse and maybe they will be able to work out what his game is. I have seen them pack these last few days, and they have invited that girl Claire to stay here while they are gone. She was more than eager to of course, always snooping around as if looking to discover some great adventure or solve a grand mystery. Lloyd, his ninja and his mother will leave to go look for their Master again tomorrow. A fools errand. Lost in time and they still treat it as if he has just wandered off.
There is a sound at the door and I retreat into the wall. It's Misako and Claire deep in conversation. Misako is filling her in on some of the chores she needs to attend to in their absence. It appears she will be staying in Cole's room. Claire seems a bit bewildered as she asks questions of Misako.
'You will be going alone? Why? Isn't it safer going together?'
'Not really. Ninjago is peaceful now. Except for some petty crime in Ninjago City, there is really nothing to be afraid of.
The Serpentine are docile, the only Skullkin still around are those boneheads Nuckal and Kruncha and they are mostly harmless. As long as I don't walk directly into Kryptarium I should be quite safe.' She chuckles. *'I've had this exact conversation with Lloyd, you know. But he is just overly cautious because of his new responsibilities. Besides, we have PIXAL to keep everyone connected and up to speed.'* Claire looks confused.
'PIXAL? Borg's robot? I haven't seen her around here? Is she still with you guys?' Misako smiles overbearingly.
'It's a little complicated. She used to be a robot ... then her body was destroyed and she got implemented into Zane's program.'
Claire looks baffled and Misako laughs at her reaction.
'She is not anymore though. Zane got damaged and PIXAL transferred into the Samurai X cave mainframe. We only found

out after Wu got lost. She now lives inside in our connected computer systems.'
Claire looks completely lost now. So am I. I find it amusing. Misako puts a comforting hand on Claire's shoulder.
'As I said ... Complicated. I don't quite understand it myself. But it is very practical. She keeps tabs on where everyone is, and we can always get a hold of each other. Well... Except for Cole. He didn't bring any device.' Misako looks worried and changes the subject fast.
'Anyhow. We will all leave first thing tomorrow ... treat the Airjitzu Temple as you would your own home while we're away. You can use the Destiny's Shadow for transportation up and down. Have as much fun as you want to ... but no parties!' They both laugh, sxhug and then Misako leaves.
Claire inspects the room with energy and enthusiasm. She has great spirit. Those were the exact qualities I was looking for when I recruited my students. I feel shame thinking about how sour that whole situation turned out. Claire seems to be getting ready for bed putting on new sheets. I leave the room. It will be nice to have her company in the absence of the ninja. Even though she won't know I'm here.

I pause for a second. I feel a presence in Cole's room. And then it's like it goes away again. I smile to myself. THIS IS SO AWESOME!!! I'll be living alone in an ANCIENT HAUNTED TEMPLE. I know it is ... I just know it! What could be better than that? I finish putting on the bedding and tuck in.
As always I run my fingers across my pendant before I go to sleep. Its curves describe an eight, two tears going opposite ways, an infinity symbol... forever. I think of my mum who gave it to me and if she knew something. That's the meaning I have put into it anyway. My mother passed away when I was eight, but as long as I have this pendant, we will be together forever. Goodnight mum! Tomorrow will be an awesome day. I just know it!

I take one last look in the Book of Spinjitzu before we leave. I will need to hide it well after, as I am sure Claire will be rummaging through the house looking for adventures. As I open

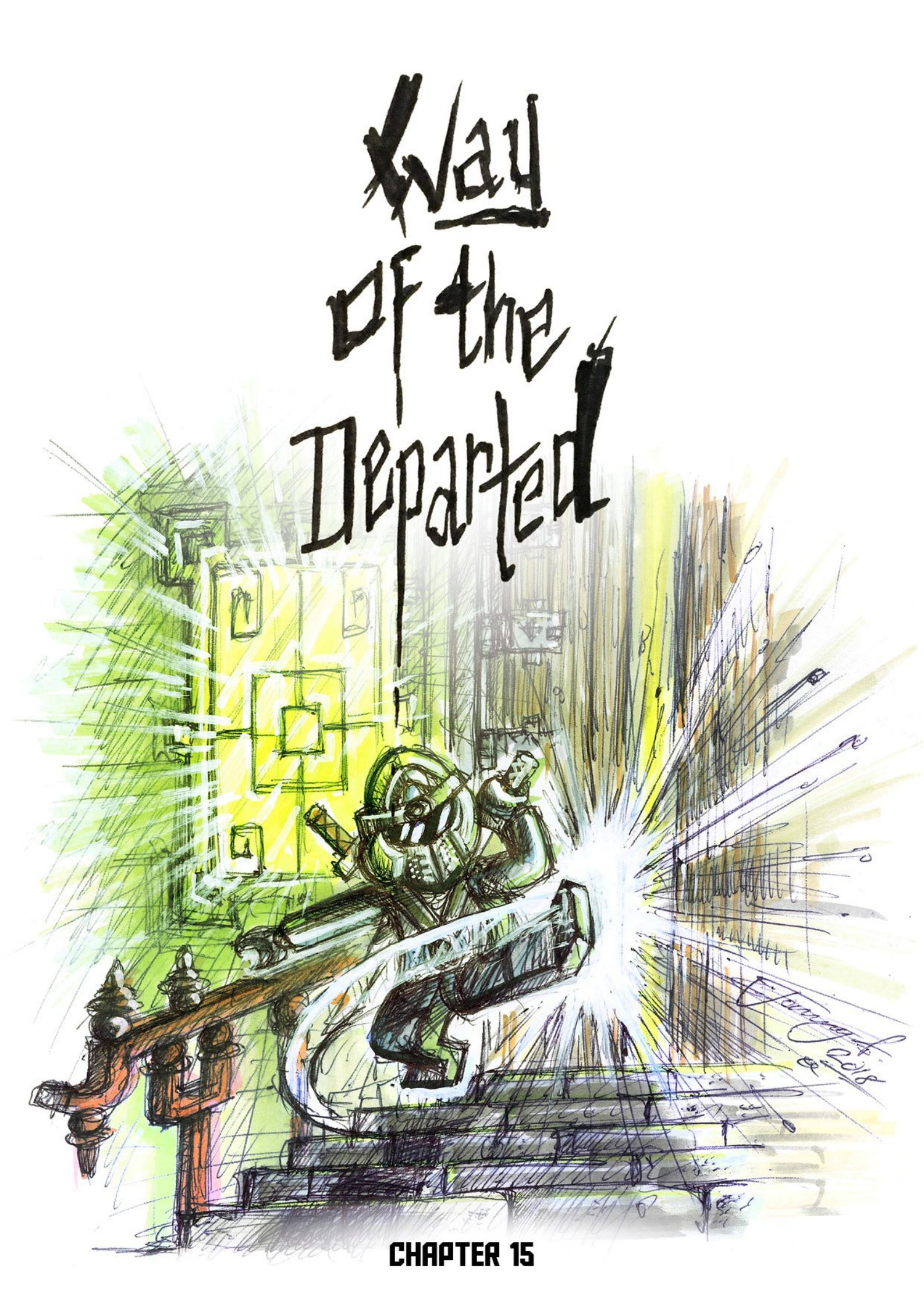
the book and my powers connect with it, I am excited to see what wisdom the book will impart on me today. As I leaf trough the pages, I notice that some big red letters have appeared on some pages I have already read. I grab a pen and start to note them down. As I progress through the book, my pulse quickens. IT IS A MESSAGE FROM MASTER WU. He knew ... he knew something would happen. It is right there in front of me:

'I will return in time ... Help me remember Spinjitzu'

It am dumbstruck. He will return! Our Master will return. This is GREAT news ....Great weird magical news. It's puzzling too. He seems to believe that he will not remember Spinjitzu for some reason. He was in pretty bad shape when we last saw him. Nya told us, she used the Reversal Time Blade to stop his rapid aging before the battle with the Time Twins though.
As I look back at the book, my heart drops. There are no letters. I just imagined the whole thing. No! I am sure I didn't! Pretty sure. Kind of sure ... but not completely sure...
I move a loose floor board, put down the book and roll a rug over the spot. I should be safe from Claire here. I am in two minds about telling the others. I prefer not revealing anything about the book and I am completely sure about what I saw.
I read the letters I noted down again, and decide to tell as much as I can. I will remind the others, that Master Wu may have lost his memory. That makes sense. If he is still out there in Ninjago and has not sought us out, something must be wrong. Traveling through time on a defunct time machine while battling arch nemesis(es) may do that to you. I have hope!

Round and round I go. I do not find this any kind of amusing, but I can accept the irony. This must be the hundredth time I pass that outcropping on that lava fall. I am inside one of the bone cages on the Ferris wheel we made using the Tornado of Creation. I mean I am NOT here. I am trapped by Clouse's Edo mind game unable to wake up. Escape. Whatever.
Like a hand on a clock I go round and round. Clouse will soon start his charge on Nom. I'm running out of time. We all are!

Way of the Departed



CHAPTER 15

I am completely worn down as I make my way back to Nom.
I have no idea what time it is, but I'm guessing dawn in not too many hours away. If anyone is coming, they will regret they ever messed with the home town of the Phantom Ninja. My traps will not be enough to stop any major invading force, but it will making advancing quietly a real challenge, strike some fear into the heats of whoever is coming, and possibly thin out their numbers a bit. Already before I go over the ridge and see Nom, I can tell something is horribly wrong. There is a bright green glow emanating from the town, and I know what it is.
As I fight my way through the unsettled crowd which has gathered outside the city hall, my fear grows. Cole is in there, and the bright green glow which beam out of the windows is blinding. Pained cries can be heard from inside. I tell everyone to stand back as I put my Phantom Samurai mask on. Its visor shields my eyes from the light. Only myself, Jerahn and my father knows about me being the Phantom Ninja, but this is more important than keeping a secret identity. People are startled as I step up kick open the heavy doors, enter and slam them behind me.
Even with my visor down, the light is overwhelming. It takes me a few seconds to adjust and locate Cole. He is on the makeshift bed we made for him, tossing back and forth like getting shocked with high voltage. His screams of pain shred air and his scar convulses and strobes violently. It looks as if it is trying to force itself across his face. I grab him and call his name as loud as I can. I pinch his arm. I shake him vigorously. I slap him across the face. I run, get a pitcher of water and watch my efforts be in vain. I cannot wake him up! I stand back in horror and watch. Cole is fighting his scar and he is losing. I have no idea what will happen when he does, but I fear the worst. I run outside and scream at everyone to get back in their houses ... get back to safety. I am relieved to see they obey. I turn and walk back in. The least I can do is try. '*WAKE UP COLE!!! WAKE UP!!!*'

'WAKE UP COLE!!!' The words are a faint echo in my head. But I cannot wake up. Trapped in my bone cage I have tried everything (and my arm hurts from pinching). I have tried to activate my earth punch, but my scar (rift) hurts too much when

I do it and I back down. Below me I see what must be several hundred Skullkin gather. They are not very organized and it looks like kinder garden kids trying to perform some stage play they don't quite understand. Still, the Skullkins' strength is in their numbers, and Clouse seems to have them highly motivated. I wonder what promises he has been giving them, and whether it is something he will actually honour. I go over the parts of his plan, he gloatingly revealed to me: He has several hundred people, the missing villagers I presume, ready to march into Nom. When the Edo power has built up in the buildings, the rift on my face, which is a doorway to the Departed Realm, will rip open and allow deceased Edo sorcerers and their acolytes back into Ninjago to take over the bodies of the villagers ... phew ... and then something other bad stuff. What part Karloff and the Skullkin play is not clear to me just yet. There seems to be little use for them except possibly herding the villagers into Nom to meet their end ... I shrug it off.

Whatever might happen, is not important. What matters is that it DOESN'T happen. I need to find some way for my mind to escape this place. It's weird. I am in a kind of dream, yet I am bound to the rules of my reality. That Edo magic is powerful stuff. I watch as Clouse walk in front of the bumbling Skullkin army. I take some glee in witnessing his frustration. Their lines are crooked, and they keep getting fights amongst themselves and drop weapons. I keep going round on the Ferris wheel, and when I'm low I can see Clouse's annoyance. Several times he raises his arms as if to give some grand speech, and several times he abandons because some random act of foolishness in the Skullkin ranks diverts everyone's attention. Finally he finds his moment.

'DISGRACED WARRIORS OF THE UNDERWORLD ... the time has come and soon your torment will be at an end.

In just a few hours I will FORCE OPEN a gateway between the Underworld and Ninjago, and you will make your VICTORIOUS RETURN and CONQUER Nom. Then I shall use my magic to return YOU ALL to YOUR FORMER GLORY!!!

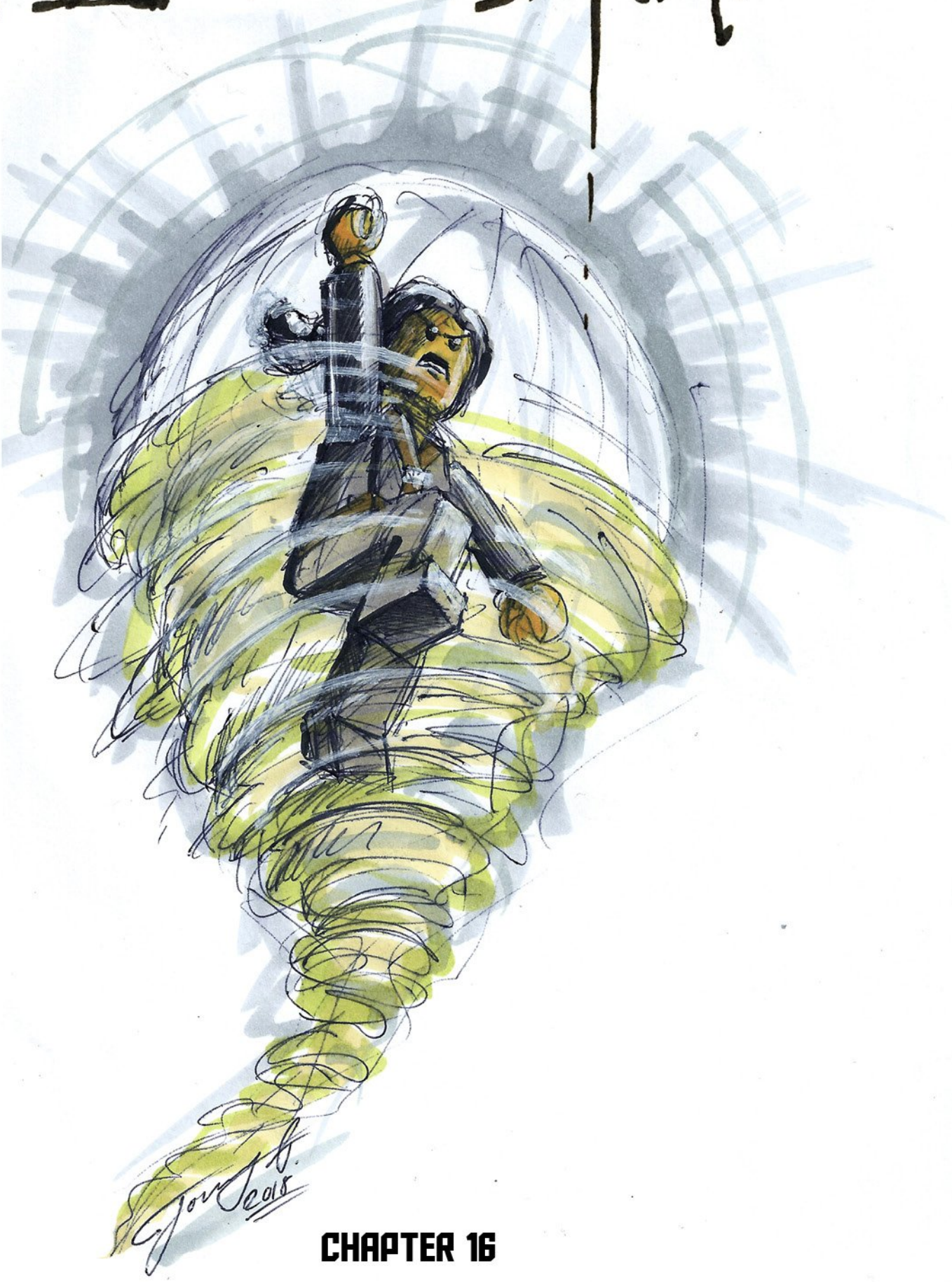
The Skullkin raise their weapons and cheer. Clouse is a master of manipulation, but there is something here which doesn't add

up. He speaks as if he has healing powers, but from what I know, he is all about domination and control. Clouse told me that he would use the villagers as vessels for the spirits of his ancestors ... Like how Morro possessed Lloyd. Ghosts need to have something to hold on to, to remain in Ninjago. I was fading because I didn't. Master Yang is being held there by the temple. As I watch the Skullkin cheer their king I slowly realize what he is planning: He will indeed bring the Skullkin to Ninjago, but not to heal them. They will just be vessels for the Edo acolytes. No redemption, no mending, no glory. Just a piece of material for another long dead spirit to inhabit. Lloyd is the grandson of the First Spinjitzu Master. He was strong and though possessed, was still able to fight Morro over control of his body. But these Skullkin and those villagers ... Their souls will be imprisoned ... lost ... replaced ... erased ... something terrible in either case. As I watch them cheer Clouse's lies and their own doom, I feel sorry for even the Skullkin.

I look at the moon. Its pale light makes my head hurt. My hands are big and clumsy, and it is hard to handle the note from the Skullking. I don't know ... I feel so off balance. Like I am not quite myself anymore. The orders are to start the march when the sun comes up. It should take us a day's march to reach Nom, and we will attack by nightfall as soon as we arrive. The Skullking writes there will be enough Edo power built up for him to send a entire army of Skullkin to join the attack. My guards are shackling the prisoners together getting them ready for the march. The more troublesome of them will remain in wheeled cages and be hauled by furry horned bovine. I don't know why we must bring the prisoners to Nom. The Skullking has not written any reason for that, and if I think too hard about it, my head just hurts. But I am the warden, it is my responsibilty and I will follow my orders. We march at sunrise.

'WAKE UP!!!' Cole is not responding to my calls. He convulses hard. I hold his body down. His scar glows brighter and brighter.

Way of the Departed



CHAPTER 16

I wake up! My body hurts all over. I look out of the window and I'm met with an eerie green glow. There is commotion in the street. I roll out of bed, but fall to my knees. My legs are sore from all the training Cole and Seliel put me through. I know why they did it and I appreciate it. For a brief moment my thoughts return to Alyce. I hope she is all right. I reach out with my mind, but there is nothing. My hand find no scar on my forehead either. I get on my feet and stagger out of the door. I can see people retreat away from the light. Some walk backwards, keeping a cautious eye on it and I understand why. I ask a an old woman about the green glow. He says she doesn't know, but that Seliel and the scarred stranger is inside the City Hall. I know I must go there.

As I open the doors, I am almost pushed back by the green light. I can hear Cole screaming, but I cannot see anything. I try to force my way forward, but the light hurts my eyes too much.

'JERAHN ... WE'RE LOSING COLE. IT'S THE SCAR!!! I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO! GET TO THE PAINTING! ASK COLE'S MASTER!'

As I run from the City Hall, everything is a blur and the sounds from the town as muted. I was shocked when Cole told Seliel that he had communicated with Yang through my painting and I am shocked that I am now running to consult with the man who wronged me so. I have no idea how I will react coming face to face with him. I take a deep breath before I Airjitzu up the building. Yang taught me this, and for a fleeting moment I wonder what my life would have been, if I had never sought him out. The building seems to resonate with some strange energy. It's not visible, but I can feel it and it is very unsettling. I brace myself as I rip two boards from the wall and squeeze my way into the secret room. It is all dark, and the contours of the painting's frame is barely visible. Now what? I stand there for a few seconds before I step forward and touch it. Nothing. But nothing is not an option. As I look at the coarse strokes, I think back to the day I painted it. I thought it was so dumb. Master Yang sitting there in front of us completely motionless. Alyce was always so much better at painting than I was. But this comes back to the real lesson. Patience! I guess I need to be patient.

My head feels like it is filled with boulders.
My body is rocking back and forth though I make no effort to move.
'She is coming to! Alyce ... are you OK?'
The voice is familiar but sounds like a faint echo. As the world around me comes into focus, I start to remember what has happened. The sun is low. It must have just come up and it's light cuts my eyes like a razor. Of course ... I am in the cage with my the other students of Yang. The cage seems to be moving. It must be on a cart or something. People walk in shackles herded forward by Skullkin.
'Where are they taking us?' My words sound alike an alien croaking coming out of my mouth.
'*Beats me! We have only been going for a few mintues. You can still see the camp. Here ... have some water.'* Milo hands me a flask of water and I drink greedily. I hadn't noticed how dry my mouth was. As if reading my mind, he starts to speak.
*'We were captured one by one while investigating the people going missing. Some by those skeleton guys and others by that guy.'*He gestures over to the left. The man with the big fists walks next to a long line of people. I feel my chin which is sore from the blow. There is something strange about him. The Skullkin react to him like he is their leader, yet his expression seems vacant, like he is walking in a daze. And if he *is* their leader, why is he walking? I find it curious. A few of those strange bone cars even drive right next to him. Yet he walks.
I feel my forehead. No scar! I try to reach out to Jerahn. But nothing. I look at the thick bamboo bars. I try to sit up, but immediately drop back down. My entire body hurts.
'Don't bother!' Milo shrugs his shoulders. '*We've been trying to pry open this cage for weeks. It's too strong. And you need to relax and regain you strength. You took some mighty blows. Here!'* He hands my some biscuits. I know he is right. What ever happens next, I might have to sit this one out.

The room is dark. I stare at the painting and find myself both hoping it will come alive and fearing it at the same time. How will I react coming face to face with my former master? He who held me against his will. Cole told me and Seliel a lot about

what happened yesterday, so I know why he did it. Still, fearing to be forgotten and loneliness is hardly and excuse for robbing us of our freedom for so long. I decide to bury my resentment deep down for now ... it is of little importance. I need to tell him about Cole and hope he has some idea of what to do.
The wait feels like hours due to Cole's faint screaming from down the street, but it has probably just been minutes. Finally the painting start to flicker green and the brush strokes start to come to life. I brace myself. Yang's stern expression light up in relief as he sees me. Or rather, think he sees Cole.
'Cole! I am so relieved you are safe, you...' He stops mid sentence and his face changes to surprise. Or is it fear, guilt or shame?
I say nothing because I don't know what to say. After a while he speaks again, his voice now a slow rasping.
'Jerahn ... I... How are you doing? I hope..' I cut him off and I am baffled how resolved my words come out.
'That can wait. This is not about you and I. Cole is in trouble.' I tell him everything I know, and hope that he has any ideas. We don't have any ideas of our own and it really comes down to this. My heart drops as I watch horrified expression.

I don't know what to say. The shock of seing with my former student and then hearing about the soon to be demise of Cole. I sent him to Nom in the hope that he would find some person and remedy against the rift on his forehead. Cole told me about Jerahn being the presence I had felt in Nom, but I now realize that going there has only sped up the opening of his rift. It was inevitable, but by sending him into that Edo power-keg, I have only sped up the process. Jerahn knows nothing and cannot help him. I look at the young man in the darkened room. He looks as lost as I feel. I can see how he struggles to keep his cool and how troubled he is with the whole situation. I don't have any answers. I prepare to deliver him the shattering news.
'Jerhan ... I...'
'I KNEW IT!!!! I JUST KNEW IT' I spin around. In the doorway illuminated by my own pale light, stands the young woman Claire. She beams with excitement as she exclaims.
'I KNEW PLACE WAS HAUNTED!!! THIS IS SO COOL!!'

Way of the Departed

CHAPTER 17

Wow! Right there, right in front of me ... Floating in midair, the ghost of Konikuda Yang... The Sensei without students. I knew this place was haunted, I just knew it! But that's not what puzzles me. Who was he talking to? He looked positively dumbstruck. But I have suspected this for so long, and now I know for sure. I have seen paintings of him all over the place and even at the museum in Ninjago City. The old custodian Sander Saunders used to show classes around and they had a portrait of him in one of the hallways. I was going to go visit the Hall of Villainy, but it never officially opened after the commotion on the Day of the Departed. Anyway, I know everything there is to know about Yang regardless. Or actually, I probably don't. But now I can ask him in person! And this is not my first big discovery of the day. I got up early and started my house-sitting adventure. In less than an hour, I made my first great find: I found this really cool book. Bound in leather, with a golden back and with an embossing of a dragon and a ninja master on the cover: 'Book of Spinjitzu'. I could have sworn the book seemed alive when I first picked it up. Or not exactly alive, but definitely vibrating with some sort of energy. I couldn't help but chuckle when I read the first page. Something about 'falling into the wrong hands'. Lol! I don't think of my own hands as 'wrong', but they are definitely curious. And now my second find of the day: An actual ghost of a long gone Airjitzu master.
This place is so cool!!!

NO!!! The painting of Yang has gone stale!
He has abandoned us! He has forsaken Ninjago!
I feel paralyzed and numb as I stand in the fading light of the painting. Jerahn, you fool! Why did you even get your hopes up?

The young woman stares at me with no fear. She has no reason to fear me, but it is still admirable. She has considerable reason for fear though. The world as she knows it may soon be coming to an end. Jerahn has just told me of Cole's condition, and when the rift opens, it will surely herald the second age of Edo. Her gaze is intense. Such a source of power is the spirit of youth. I sought it out myself in unnatural ways and it became my curse. For a moment, I find myself feeling relieved that I am not alone, but the

direness of the situation sets in again. What shall become of her... or any of us? Is there any hope at all?

Yes! The bone cage is finally starting to give. Soon I will be able to squeeze my way out of here. The Skullkin troops below me seem restless. They have been standing around for a while, and are obviously growing impatient. I haven't seen Clouse for some time. Finally I can squeeze through. I guess all that NOT eating cake is paying off... even in a dream, or whatever this is. If Clouse is the one holding me here, I have a clear purpose and it's bad news for him.

I just need to evade a few hundred Skullkin and track him down. Piece of cake! As the Ferris wheel is at its lowest, I drop down. There isn't too much cover around here, but at least the colour of my gi works for me. As I peek out from behind a blackened stalactite (or is it stalagmite?), I spot stairs leading into the ground. I struggle to recall as much as I can about this place from my last visit... the real one... But all my mind can come up with is a lot of molten lava and...

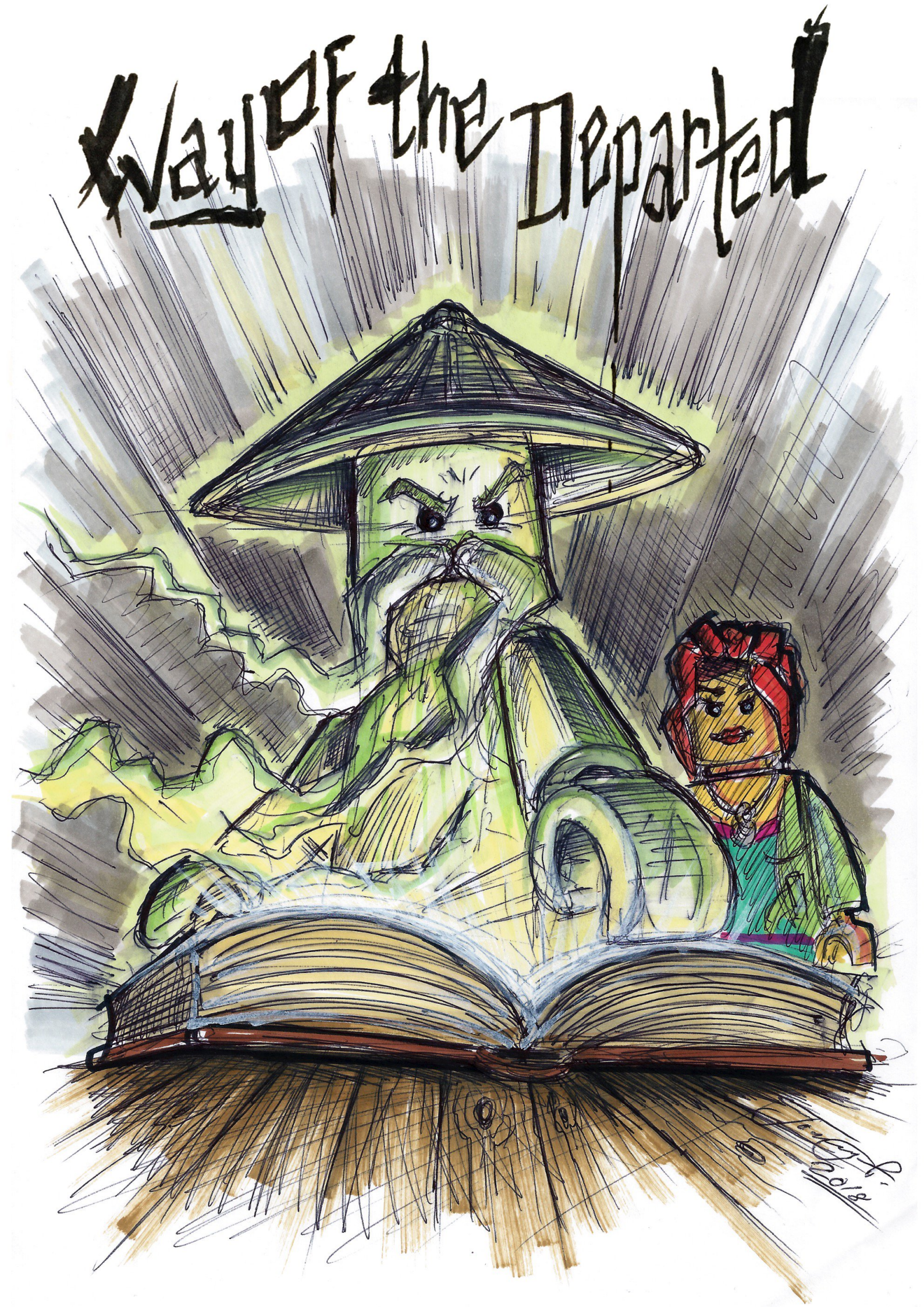
I feel something press down on my shoulder... Busted! No need to fight. No way I can take on a whole army. I raise my arms and turn around slowly, as my mind races to come up with some clever, defiant last line... but the words stick in my throat. Two huge glowing red eyes stare right into my soul. SPIDER!!! Bone-like prongs grab me, and in a second, I am pulled from the ground, and up a hundred feet into the air. The cackling sound of the Skull Spider echoes through the massive cave, but does not disturb the Skullkin legion so far below. As I struggle in the grip of the massive spider, I go through the possible scenarios:

1: Death by spider.
2: Death by falling onto the rock-hard ground.
3: Death by dropping into a sea of molten lava.
4: Death by somehow defying one, two and three,and then facing an entire well-armed and battle-ready Skullkin army.
5-10: I am sure there are more that I haven't figured out yet.

I focus on the first three options. I wrap my arm around a slimy spider string. That eliminates 2 and 3 for now. I start kicking and

punching to eliminate option 1. I punch and punch the spider. Its teeth grab at my leg, and I feel a sharp pain but I keep hitting. My fists are sore as the spider goes limp. I take a few seconds to catch my breath and assess my situation: trapped in some hyper-real dream, hanging upside down in a sticky spider web next to a spider that may come to at any moment. Below me: molten lava, and several hundred Skullkin. I smile to myself, as I hear Jay's voice speak my thoughts into my inner ear. It's just been a few days, but I miss that guy's freak-out moments. He always puts the situation into perspective. I start to look around. What do I do next?

The young woman starts to approach me cautiously. It feels uncomfortable being studied like this, and so unlike any other encounter I have had with the living. She has a sizeable book in her hand - not one I recognize, so it must be one of the ninja's. I am surprised that I have not known about it. It emanates a curious, inaudible hum, as if it is loaded with great energy.
'Konikuda Yang, I presume. I am honoured to meet you', she says to me. Her voice is girlish, high-pitched, and a stark contrast to the solemnness she attempts to portray. I have seen such behaviour before; long ago, when I was sought out by prospective students. I say nothing. I don't know what to say.
'My name is Claire. I am... um... the... recently designated ... maintenance manager of this facility... Ahem. Cleaning lady, I guess. Let me start over. I'm Claire... Hi!'
'*Where did you get that book?'* I waste no time. The situation is dire. Ninjago is at risk, and I have no ideas about how to remedy the situation. But right there in front of me: a book, resonating with energy, possibly elemental or magical. With Sensei Wu on the cover, by the looks of it. Could this book hold some answers? My thoughts are interrupted by her reply; she has clearly lost some confidence because of my direct approach.
'Uh... err... I found it... In Lloyd's room. It was just lying around... under some floor boards... covered by a rug. I didn't mean to pry. Honestly!'
'You have nothing to fear from me, child. I am pleased to meet you too. I need your help... and whatever wisdom is in that book.'


Way of the Departed

The ghost of Sensei Yang leafs though the pages of the Book of Spinjitzu. Or rather, he moves his hands over it, and the pages turn untouched. For a brief moment, I wonder if these are 'the wrong hands' the book referred to, but then I take comfort in the thought that the book seems to have some sort of life of its own. It would hardly reveal any new information to the person with 'the wrong hands'.

The book is filled with neat drawings and texts about all things Ninjago. Spinjitzu is well-described, and there's even the lineage of Master Wu and Garmadon illustrated on a family tree. A very short and strange one at that... There seems to just be a father, but nothing before that. I'm guessing this book was written by Master Wu. I recognize his penmanship, though some of it seems feebler than usual somehow; like it was written in a weakened state. I take a more thorough peek at the family tree before Sensei Yang turns the page again, and I catch the words 'The First Spinjitzu Master' ... That's the way Wu refers to his father? But Spinjitzu was invented centuries, or even millennia ago, by all accounts. How can the First Spinjitzu Master be Wu's father? Maybe there is more to these guys than the common folk in Ninjago know about.

Yang sighs deeply, like he is not finding the wisdom he is looking for. *'How long were you listening before you entered the room, Claire? How much did you hear?'* The question sounds both like an accusation, and a request for help. Better be honest.

'I was outside the door for at least five minutes. I heard you talking to someone... and I could hear most of what you and the other guy, whoever and wherever he is, were talking about. Something about Cole, but I didn't quite catch that part. Is he all right?'

Yang hesitates. He then slowly shakes his head.

'*No ... No, he is not all right. The person I was talking to is Jerahn, a former student of mine. He is close to Cole, but unable to help him. Cole is trapped inside a dream... or some nightmare-like trance that he cannot wake up from. If he doesn't wake up soon, he will surely perish. I was hoping this book could provide some answers, but I don't see them.'*

"... Inside a dream."… Those words... The last time I heard them spoken out loud was when I was eight. My mother was on her deathbed. She had been sick for a while, and it was terrible to see

her wither away. She had called me over to her side. As she put the infinity necklace in my hand, she told me she would be departing soon. I asked her where she would be going, and she said that her soul would be travelling to another realm. She told me that she believed it would be a beautiful place; where the sky would be deep blue, grassy fields with golden flowers would stretch into infinity, and the wind would be forever caressing her skin. A place she would be free of her pain. It would be like being inside of a dream. Yang seems to notice that I am lost in my thoughts.
'*What is inside your mind?'* Is that a hint of hope in his voice?
'... Realms. How do you visit other realms?'
Suddenly, a bright golden glow emanates from the Book of Spinjitzu. Letters start to write themselves on the pages. Or maybe they were already there, and we just couldn't see them. We lean in closer. It is another entry written in Wu's weakened hand.

On the subject of Realms:

Realms; One of the most puzzling mysteries of this world, or any world for sure. I have visited a few in my time, and found them wondrous, as well as perplexing. Some are beautiful; with wild jungles, floating mountains and glowing waterfalls. Others, like the Mountains of Madness, are dark, brooding, and will crush as man's spirit and scar his soul. Exactly how many there are is bit of mystery too. I have heard my father say sixteen once, but I don't know if this includes Ninjago. Now with the Cursed Realm, and possibly its sister realm destroyed, maybe just fifteen or fourteen. What happened to the souls of the Cursed Realm? I can only speculate, but I hope that they have found peace in the Departed Realm. At least we know, by the events on the Day of the Departed, that Chen went there, so that is my hope for all of them.
Though I have often had the urge to visit other realms, I have mostly remained in Ninjago. This is my responsibility, bestowed upon me by my father, and I have not let my own desires for adventures lead me away too often. Also, I find traversing realms most unpleasant. These are the ways for the living to do it that I currently know of:

1. Travellers' Tea (my favourite)

By breathing in the complex and intense odours of Travellers'

Tea, your body becomes one with the fabric of space that ties the realms together. Your mind and physical self will be transported to the realm you desire. The arrival can often be quite the bumpy ride though, unless you are very knowledgeable about your destination, and can visualize it in your mind perfectly.

2. Realm Crystal

The origins of the Realm Crystal are unknown to me, and there may even be others. Only one is known to exist in Ninjago. We have secured it in Borg's vault in Hiroshi's Labyrinth for now.
Much like Travellers' Tea, it transports you to whatever destination is on your mind at the time of your departure.

3. Dragons

These magnificent beasts can ferry between realms.
Originating from the First Realm, they are hard to come by these days. I doubt there is a single dragon left in Ninjago.

4. Incantations to open a portal or rift

I most find spells and magic off-putting. It takes great skill, but it can be twisted and corrupted in so many ways, and should only be used as a last resort. Fortunately, only a few spell books remain. The last one I saw was a while ago, when we burnt Clouse's at the Corridor of Elders.

5. Thin spots (not quite sure what to call them)

These "back doors" are passageways which exist physically and geographically, and lead to other specific realms.
Examples are the travelling storm 'The Blind Man's Eye', which leads to Cloud Kingdom, and the lava fall inside the Temple of Fire, which allows passage into the Underworld."

Yang turns to me. His eyes are wild, like he has stumbled upon some insane epiphany. He points to the last word.
'To save Cole, you must go to tzhat *thin spot. I have a feeling the Skullkin may somehow be involved in this. It is just a hunch, but it is our only bet at this time.'* His eyes flare up.
'Claire... You need to travel into the Underworld.'

Way of the Departed

CHAPTER 19

The wind is blowing in my hair. I am flying though the sky at breakneck speed. My name is Claire, and I am on a secret ninja mission… HOW COOL IS THAT?!?!
Actually, I am not really sure how cool it is. I am falling apart inside, and my thoughts race in a thousand different directions at once. Within the last hour, I have learned that ghosts exist for sure. I've seen a magic book, learned that Cole - and in fact, all of Ninjago - is in danger, and that I am the only hope. I am flying as fast as the Destiny's Shadow and my own skills allow me to. I am doing pretty good, considering this is my first time...
But I am very scared. I glance over my shoulder, towards the backpack on my back with its odd, square shape. It was the only thing I brought, but it seems that the Destiny's Shadow is pretty well-stocked with equipment. I'm not sure I'm gonna need it.
'Claire... You need to go to the Underworld.'
I keep hearing those words. Apparently, there is some lava fall in the ancient Fire Temple which was destroyed in a volcanic eruption some years ago. The lava fall somehow allows passage to the Underworld. At this speed, I should get there a few hours before sunset. … I am so in over my head here.
I have made up my mind: This is not cool at all.

I let go of the spider string and land behind a rock. I should be able to sneak past the lines of Skullkin unnoticed. I look up and see the Bone Spider coming to. It's a nasty creature, but I'm glad it's unhurt. I make my way over to the stairs that lead underground. I am sure Clouse must be down there somewhere. Time is short. I hope Seliel and Jerahn are doing better than I sam.

Cole has stopped twitching. His breath is slow and raspy, but at least he seems to be in less pain. His scar is still emitting a blinding light, and its glow continues to intensify. I reason with myself that Cole will be all right for now. I'm not making any difference with him anyway.
As I step outside, I see the street has cleared. I take off my Phantom Ninja mask, and the wind blowing against my skin is soothing. The sun is high on the sky now. I must have been in there for hours. I am exhausted. I hear hammering. The final bit

of construction on the Edo towers has begun, and by the looks of it, they will be done very soon.
The shadows casting onto the streets from the towers create an eerie contrast between darkness and light. It feels like some kind of omen. Jerahn sits hunched over by the foot of the City Hall stairs. Not a good sign!
I approach him gently. He looks up at me with bloodshot eyes, and I ask him: *'Did you get in touch with Cole's Master?'*
'He abandoned us! That selfish coward! I told him what was happening to Cole. He looked scared, and then he just turned and left the painting.'... He shakes his head. *'I really hoped...'*
My vision blurs. I have been up all night setting up traps and struggling with Cole for more hours than I know of for sure. I don't have time to play therapist for Jerahn now. I have a strong feeling we will be attacked soon, and I need to make sure Nom is ready to fend for itself... No matter how hopeless the odds.
I give Jerahn a pat on the back and tell him to go get some rest. I will need him alert and ready to fight soon. Then I make my way to my father's house to update him on the situation, and get him to organize the people.
The look on my father's face is a combination of hopelessness and sheer terror. '*We will be attacked?!? By who? By what? Today? Tonight?'*He sinks into his chair, and pointedly gestures towards a small scrap of paper on his desk.
'A courier arrived with that not 20 minutes ago. It's from the investors.'
I pick up the letter. It has a gold, embossed, highly-ornamented letterhead. I start reading the beautifully written words, revealing more bad news:

Highly Esteemed Mayor of Nom,

We are pleased to announce that we will be arriving early, and we eagerly look forward to admiring the charms and beauty of an authentic Edo-era city. Our party of eight expects to arrive on this very day, shortly before nightfall, and we would appreciate if accommodations would be ready for our convenience.

Sincerely, Elon Rahn

After reading the letter, I ask: *'Great! Any way we can stall them?'*, though I know the answer already.
'The courier left immediately. I have no idea where they will be arriving from.' My father lets out a defeated laugh.
'Good news is that the city will be ready in time. Bad news is that it will be an Edo hotspot populated by the damned, and that it may end Ninjago as we know it. … Maybe we should all leave.'
... I guess I will have to be the responsible one here.
'No! Giving up on Nom would be giving up on Ninjago. We bowed down once before during the Nindroid crisis. Never again! We arm the townspeople, and we fight. We owe that to our legacy.'
But my father shakes his head. *'The people of Nom are not fighters. It will be futile.'*
'But father! You're the MAYOR!!! We must fight back. We...'
He looks up at me curiously as I pause. You could cut through the tension between us with a knife, as our both our minds go into overdrive. He is getting the exact same idea as I have. He stares into my eyes and nods slowly.
'Yes... Yes, we must. And maybe we can. I will get to it right away.'
I feel a touch of pride as he rushes out of the front door. I look out through the window while he runs past the City Hall and towards the industrial district. It's great to see him like that.
Go, Dad! Turn an enemy into a friend. Get us an army!

The Fire Temple is right in front of me. There is visible damage from the eruption. The he heat here is intense, lava flows and lin the side of the temple. I hold onto my necklace for courage, and cover my mouth with my shirt as I carefully navigate the Shadow inside. I am starting to get good at this. There is little in here besides rocks and a lake of lava. A single chain hangs from the ceiling. I wonder what the purpose of that is. No lava fall though; maybe the book was wrong? I glance towards my backpack again.
No! It's too early for that. This is MY mission! I do another few passes and notice the lava floating away from the lake under the fallen rocks. There has been a cave-in. I start searching through the stuff on the Shadow and find some dynamite. I'm gonna have to blast ... inside an active volcano. Not cool at all!

Way of the Departed
CHAPTER 20

I count down from twenty. These are the longest twenty seconds of my life. I have gone through the 'plan' a million times in my head, but there is SO much stuff I don't know about, and SO much stuff that can go wrong. Blasting inside an active volcano is not an exact science, and I am in no way an expert. In fact, I have no idea what I am doing. In my head, I imagine an engraved brass plaque with a pointed epitaph:

Here lies Claire
... Stupid girl with delusions of courage and a fatal taste for adventure.
Died in a feeble attempt to go into the Underworld by setting off explosives inside an active volcano.
Stupid, stupid girl!

As my countdown reaches six, the dynamite goes off.
I was just about to cover my ears. 'Man, it's loud', I manage to think before the shockwave hits the Destiny's Shadow. I struggle to keep my balance. Every fibre in my body screams, ordering me to get out of there.
'THE PLAN, CLAIRE! STICK TO THE PLAN!!!' My brain shrieks at me. I carefully push the control lever forward and exit my cover. ... The volcano is still resonating from the blast; stalactites drop from the ceiling into the lava and make thick geysers shoot up. As much as I can see through the smoke, the debris appears to be gone, or at least scattered enough for me to make it through. I waste one second to swallow hard, then push the lever all the way forward. I figure if you need to go into the Underworld, you need do it fast ... and besides: Cole needs help! Fast!

I am just about to make my way downstairs, but I pause.
I hear a faint echo. Sounds like an explosion a hundred miles away. I look over at some of the Skullkin troops. They don't seem to notice. Probably just my imagination.

'BAD IDEA CLAIRE, BAD IDEA CLAIRE!!! My brain yells at me as I dodge death from above and below. Luckily the Destiny's Shadow is very agile, and though I am just inches from being

crushed or burned at any time, I am actually pretty impressed with myself. I look for my window of opportunity. NOW!
I stop circling and go forward towards the opening from the blast. Everything becomes a blur of reds and yellows. And then suddenly I drop. It takes several seconds for my body to adjust and my mind to understand what is actually happening:
I am sailing down, vertically down on a lava fall!
I look back but the entrance is too far behind me to see. I must be going several hundred miles an hour, so not much I can do anyway except to hold on for dear life. The image of the plaque inside my head appears again except now it says:

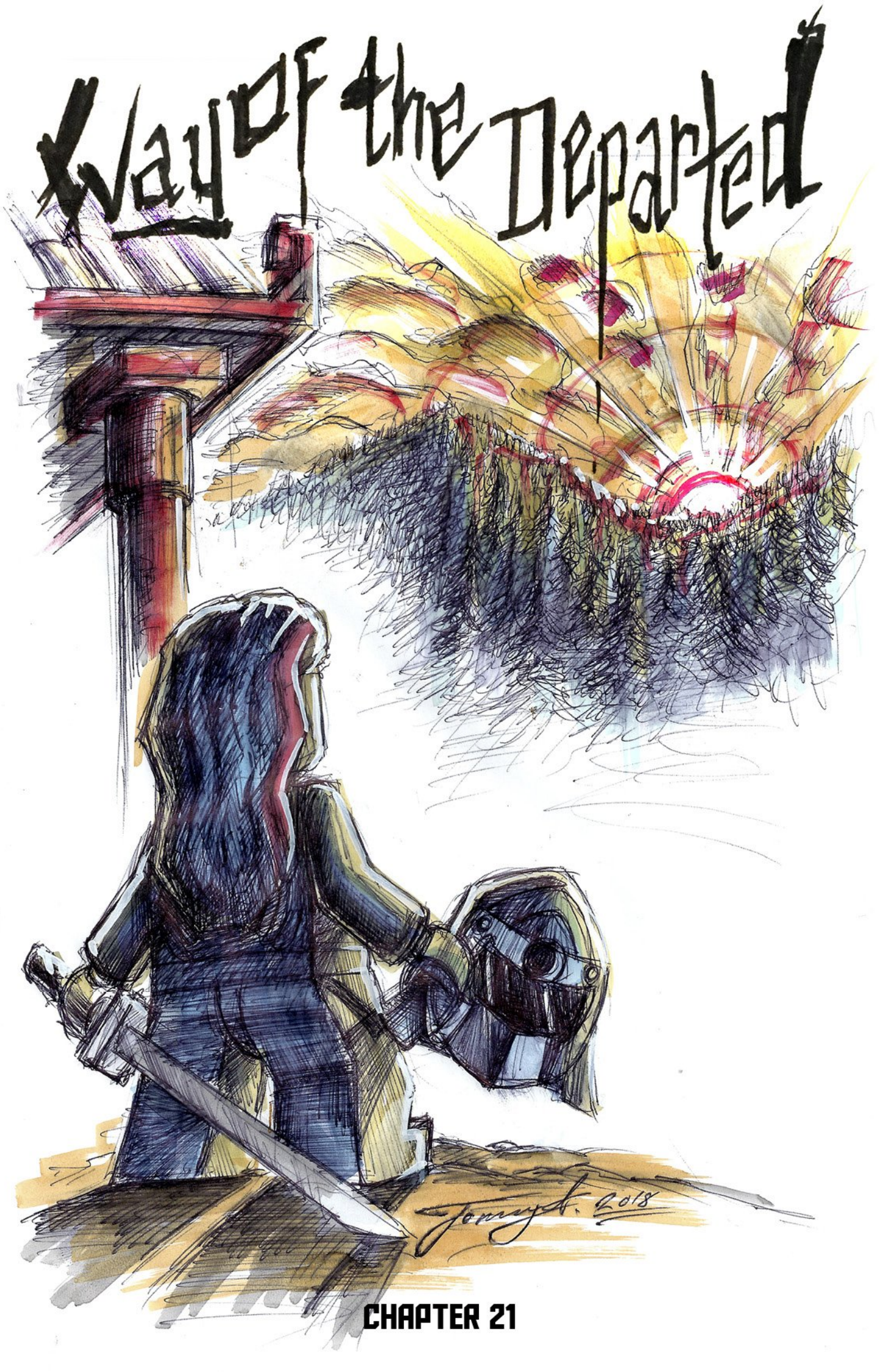
Here lies Claire
Last seen diving head-first into a flaming inferno in a flying boat.
The only traces found of her were ashes blowing in the wind.
Stupid, stupid girl!

I have no idea how long I dive... but suddenly, the world seems to spin. I am bombarded with colour, and then the world turns white. Have I fainted? Is this it? Am I dead? In the Departed Realm? I am suddenly filled with an overwhelming joy. Maybe I will see my mother soon! My hand fumbles as I reach for my pendant. The joy is short though, as I am overtaken with guilt and sadness. If I am dead, I never got a chance to say goodbye to my dad; I never fell in love with anybody (at least I think I didn't), and, worst of all, I guess: I have failed Cole, and Ninjago. Stupid, stupid girl. I swallow deep, and try to prepare my soul.

I put on my Phantom Ninja mask as head down the street.
The shadows are getting longer. Two hours until sunset at the most. I hear a faint scream and a loud snap. I spin towards the sound, and stand perfectly still. Another snap, and more screaming. Whatever is coming for us has reached my traps, and now knows that Nom will not go down without a fight. It's a mixture of good and bad news. Now I know where they are coming from, and I estimate that they will be on us in just under two hours. Just as darkness falls. Just as a party of unsuspecting investors arrive. My thoughts go

to Cole and Jerahn. I really hope that Jerahn has worked something out. I need both of them by my side for this. Right now, there is just me, versus some unseen army. But if my father is successful, I will soon have an army of my own.
Standing there in the street, I realize how alone I am in this moment, and how much I rely on others. That's not how I originally envisioned the Phantom Ninja. I close my eyes, and wish for the best...

My eyes are wide open! The white light has disappeared, and charred black islands scattered in an ocean of molten lava are coming right at me. I pull back the controls as hard as I can. Waves of lava splash up as the Shadow plows through the thick liquid ... BUT I MADE IT! I AM IN THE UNDERWORLD! I AM IN THE UNDERWORLD!
I wake up gasping! My lungs burn. I must have passed out. I have no idea for how long. Gosh, it's hot in here, but that is expected. I am in the Underworld! What is NOT expected is the bone-like Ferris wheel right next to me, and the several hundred Skullkin which stand around in crooked rows close to it. Have they seen me? How could they not have seen me? But they haven't, it seems. I quickly pick myself up and navigate the Shadow close behind the Ferris wheel. At least for now I'm hidden, and I aim to stay that way. I am not a ninja. I can't fight, but hiding and sneaking I can do. Hastily, I put on my backpack. I have no idea what to do, so I am sure it will come very handy soon.
Some stairs lead underground, and I decide it is as good a place to start as ever. Sneaking past several hundred Skullkin is not easy, but I make my way over there and slip down the stairs. It is pitch black down here, so I can only rely on my feet. My descent into darkness feels like it takes forever, but finally, I see something!
The huge room in front of me flickers with strange, pulsating light. A ghostly man stands at the far end waving his arms.
I smile to myself. Master Yang told me I might find something like this. But just as I reach into my backpack to pull out an ace, I am grabbed from behind...



CHAPTER 21

I don't like doing this, but I cannot take any chances.
The pulsating light from the next room and the light from my scar let me see fleeting glimpses of the person (a girl?) struggling in my arms. A sharp edge from something inside her backpack pokes me in my chest, as I pull her towards me. Her teeth bite into my hand and I feel a sharp pain shoot up though my arm, yet I force myself to not bellow out the pain. I sneak a peek at Clouse who waves his arms around in big slow gestures. What ever he is creating is getting bigger all of the time. Its light is blinding and a loud otherworldly hum echoes through the room. He as not noticed anything, so I focus MY attention back on ... My jaw drops. Claire?!? Another bite. This time my grip slips.
'LET GO OF ME YOU BAG OF BONES!!!' she hisses.
'Shhhhh ... Claire ... It's me! Cole! I am not a skullkin!'
For a few minutes she keeps struggling. Then she relaxes as I loosen my grip and allow her to turn and face me. I check again that Clouse still hasn't heard anything. Lucky!
'What are you doing here Claire?!?! Isn't this a dream?'
Claire hesitates, then lights up in broad smile that seems totally inappropriate given the circumstances.
'Are you implying that you dream about me earth-boy?'
'What?!?! No. No. Why would I ... No!'
Claire has always had the ability to catch me off guard, and her presence here blows my mind. Before I can pull myself together to come up with a more eloquent reply she continues:
'I am here to help you. You are still in Nom ... or part of you is still in Nom. I don't know how this magical-sorcery-ninja business-works. Clouse has brought you ... part of you here and he's holding you captive. He is an Edo sorcerer and he is behind this big plot to build up some concentration of Edo power. He wants to tear open some rift to do something terrible.'
A sharp pain shoots through my brain. My scar hurts so much. Claire looks puzzled at it as I flinch.
'How do you now all this?' I ask her. She smiles again.
'Maybe I am just really smart ... or maybe I am not and have had some help. She opens her backpack, and my jaw drops yet again.

Explosions go off nearby and skullkin fly through the air. The sound of their screams give me a headache. Spikes shoot out of the ground as another Skullkin triggers some sort of trap and is impaled on spikes which shoot out of the ground. Another is hit by something unseen in the dark. The cheering applause from the people trapped in the cages makes my head hurt. I slam my big metallic fists together to make them shut up, but there is no metallic clank. Now my hands hurt. What is wrong with me? What am I doing here? More skullkin get taken out by traps, and others start to panic, but there are so many of them that losing a few won't matter, so I order them to press on. Soon we will be at the town. As we step up into a clearing between the trees, it becomes visible. A few Skullkin are hit by shuriken and some fall into a covered pit. I order the Skullkin to bring the shackled prisoners to the front.
The light of the sun setting over the town's tall spires burns in my eyes. I look down at my hands ... they hurt. I don't feel like myself. I tell the Skullkin to get ready to fight. I don't know why.

I feel my scar. The cage rocks beneath me. I find myself mildly amused by seeing the Skullkin get taken out by traps. My fellow students cheer next to me, but the laughter stops as the man with the big fists orders the Skullkin to bring people the front of the procession. I hope no one will get hurt.

The sounds of my traps have stopped. For what is was worth, I hope it has thinned the ranks of whatever is coming our way. Should I alert and arm the people of Nom? I look towards the industrial district. I hope it won't be necessary. If my father's idea works, the Phantom Ninja will soon have an army to command of her own. If only there is enough time. I look towards the City Hall. *Cole ... come back to us we need you!*

'Cole! I am so sorry I have brought this upon you.'
This was the last thing I expected to see here in the UnderWorld. In Claire's hands, the gold framed portrait of Master Yang looks saddened as he is taking in the surroundings. He cuts off my questions and explains what

he has learned; While Claire was going to the Fire Temple in the Destiny's Shadow and entered the UnderWorld through some 'thin spot', he has rummaged the Temple of Airjitzu library to learn as much as he can. Apparently 'Edo' is ancient Ninjagon for 'Earth'. The core idea of the Edo magic practiced several hundreds of years ago, was to rise above the earth. He explains how he has just now figured out that the martial art he invented, Airjitzu, is powered by Edo. He mutters something about that also being the reason the Temple of Airjitzu, an ancient Edo temple must have become airborne. I try to understand, but all I hear is a lot of use of the word 'Edo' and a whole lot of vague connections between stuff. I ask him to break it down and feed me only the basics. Some of it I already know. Other things is news to me and I struggle to understand it, but I guess Sensei Yang knows what he is talking about. Here goes:

1. Edo power is somehow the element of Earth in a tainted and magically corrupted form. It is bad!
2. I am the Master of Earth and I am so somehow connected to the Edo.
3. Airjitzu draws on Edo power. We shouldn't do it any more.
4. I am still in Nom yet in a deep trance ... How I am also here is lost on me.
5. Clouse has made sure that Edo era buildings that have been re-erected in Nom which concentrate Edo power.
My, the Master of Earth's presence there, is amplifying it.
6. Clouse is not lying; If a sufficient amount Edo power is allowed to build up, the scar left on my forehead, after we Airjitzu'ed through the rift to the Departed Realm, will rip open and allow departed Edo sorcerers and their acolytes back into Ninjago. They will need vessels to stay in Ninjago ... namely the Nom villagers and Skullkin.
7. I need to get back to Nom and stop this from happening.

Do you follow? No? Me neither! But that's how Sensei Yang says it all fits together.

But, before I can finish my thoughts, Clouse calls out in some ancient tongue. The portal glows brightly. My blood freezes as I hear the sound of thousands of Skullin heading our way.

Way of the Departed

CHAPTER 22

***I am** Elon Rahn...* Well not really. But it's the name I have assumed and I keep reminding myself. It's important to keep up appearances in my line of work. Few people would call it work really. I am a Jack of all trades and this time the 'work' is fraud. The eight fellas in my party are businessmen and gullible ones too. All it took was some smooth words, a finely crafted suit and a well lay-outed chart to persuade them that the unique and historical architecture of the city of Nom would be a great return on investment. My daughter made the charts and the missus made the suit for me. They don't exactly approve of my ventures, but hey! What's a man to do? I've got a family to provide for, so though I am not exactly proud of what I do, I do it with savvy and conviction. It's the only way to make it work convincingly.

We will arrive in Nom soon. A sting of guilt hits me. I know the mayor is a good man, but I cannot be distracted by sympathy for those I prey on. He will do fine ... at least I convince myself he will. He made it through the Nindroid crisis all-right. He'll bounce back. Conviction is important.

The investors in my party are cheerful and slightly intoxicated. A good way for me too keep them gullible and optimistic. I am not exactly sure what we will see when we get to Nom, but I have arranged that we arrive late, which would get them right to bed and give me enough time to explore and come up with a game plan. I am not worried. This should be a push-over ... unlike some of the other times.

I have definitely done things that didn't turn out right and I couldn't justify to neither my family nor myself. It's not always my fault though. I have been gullible from time to time too, and my failures have given me the valuable knowledge that I believe now defines me. For instance; I you are ever down on your luck, more than a little drunk and is offered a drink by a person who presents himself as Sultan Archron and proposes to help you out for a trade which will 'cost you no coin', think twice, think again and then go back to your self-pity and drinking. It will not do you any good. And while we're at it; Don't put yourself in an situation where you are so down on your luck you have to drown your self-loathing in booze in the first place.

Another time I was approached by an associate of Mister Chen, a rather unpleasant man by a the name of Clouse.
It was a simple capture and deliver job and I didn't think much of it. I have done that before. The target was an person whose only known relative had passed away recently and had some degree of memory loss ... in short, a person who would be missed by few. Tracking down the target was easy, but when I learned that it was the Nindroid Zane, the complications started. Not only had I have dealings with the Ninja before, but I had even left them in a rather ... precarious situation at our last encounter. Also, Zane was presumed dead. Yet here he was shiny and new, alive and well (if you can say 'alive' about a Nindroid). This wasn't the easy pickings I had anticipated. When I reported back to Clouse that this was not what I had bargained for and that I wanted out, I was convinced in no uncertain terms that I would either complete the job or my family would pay ... he smiled slyly, waved his arms around and conjured up some sort of portal showing the missus and children. He knew exactly where they were, and I had no choice than to complete the job. Conviction is important ... lesson learned.
Another thing I didn't expect ... Zane wasn't alone anymore. He had a girlfriend (of a Nindroid can have a girlfriend and a Nindroid can be a girl). I had to put away my ideals about family and just go through with it.
I had a lot of reflections about life and death on that job. How could Zane still be 'alive' after his sacrifice to save New Ninjago City from the reincarnated Overlord? Can Nindroids create life? And cane one life be more precious and valuable than another? I suppose that kind of thinking (and my heavy drinking), was what attracted the Soul Archer to me in the first place. Don't mess with the dead ... another lesson learned. I try to keep my dealings more monetary these days. One last score is all it takes, then my scamming days are over. At least I hope so. I hope to soon return to my family with a (semi) clean conscience.
I see the lights of Nom bleeding through the dense branches of the trees in front of us. Time to get into character. Not Ronin ... I am *Elon Rahn* I remind myself, and this will be a push over!

We need to act fast. Sensei Yang speaking from his portrait has filled me in on all the details, which I still struggle to make heads or tails of, and we don't have much time. Clouse's portal back to Ninjago glows ever brighter and the sound thousands of footsteps from the thousands of approaching Skullkin grows louder. Also, I need to consider Claire. Even with the future of Ninjago in the balance, I cannot ignore that she is the reason Ninjago may have a future at all. Getting Sensei Yang's portrait to me, has allowed the chance that I can stop this. I mean WE can stop this. I think of Seliel, her father, Jerahn and the citizens of Nom ... and I realize, even with them at my side, chances are slim. But still we fight. Master Wu has taught me well ... Ninja never quit!

So, I think fast and drag along Claire. But I am held back by the words of Sensei Yang. I am here only in essence, whereas Claire's physical self here. She will need to exit the Underwold the way she came; by a fire-fall on the other side of a thousand approaching Skullkin. Time for plan B I guess (or is it C? C it is! ... C is for COLE!).

I push Claire into a recess in a wall and tell her to keep quiet. I whisper a few instructions to the portrait of Yang. Then I myself is anything BUT quiet ... NINJAAAAAAA-GO!

As I Spinjitzu down the rest of the steps, I hear the thousands of Skullkin boots hasten to a run. In front of me Clouse turns to see what the commotion is about ... good!

His concentration is broken and his portal starts to flicker unevenly and shrink. I have to get though it and make sure it closes after I leave. Close sneers. He seems to have picked up on my plan and turns his attention back to the portal. I do a few laps around the room to make sure the advancing Skullkin are occupied so Claire can slip by ... I kick around a few just for show. Then I go for the portal.

As I rush past Clouse, I drop Yang's portrait on the ground. Everything becomes a mash of purples and greens as I dive in. Behind me I can hear Yang start to loudly scorn Clouse.

I hope it will be enough to break his concentration and that Claire's route is clear on the other side of the Skullkin army. Clouse will open the portal again soon and I need to be ready.

Way of the Departed

CHAPTER 23

As we enter Nom, the sounds of hammering ceases. In the last light of the of the setting sun, I see workmen pack up their tools. Other strange sounds can be heard from the surrounding forest, but I can't make out what it is.
My entourage, the investors, seem only mildly interested in the majestic buildings. They are too tired and too tipsy to care about money matters at this hour even though it's the reason they are here in the first place. That suits me just fine. A strange green light emits from what I assume must be the City Hall. Curious ... I will need to check that out later. We are welcomed by a very friendly representative who humbly apologises that the Mayor is unavailable to meet us at this hour, but assures us that he is looking forward to host us in the morning. He offers to show us to our accommodations and my party is happy to follow to get their sleep. I excuse myself ... Time to get to work!
I put on my trusty old thermal eye-piece and see perfectly in the dark. Goodbye *Elon Rahn*, hello Ronin Kognito! I slip into the shadows. Time to come up with a game plan!

We are not ready for this. I stumble out of the City Hall and into the main street where I am greeted by a relieved but clearly stressed out and fatigued Seliel. She has donned her Phantom Ninja armour and looks like Ninja Godess. She fills me in on everything. The approaching army of Clouse's Skullkin warriors will be upon us soon. Seliel hopes that her traps have thinned their ranks, but there is no telling how many we will face. I fill her in on what have happened on my end and I see her courage sink even deeper. She closes here eyes for several seconds and I know that one of the biggest battles I have ever witnessed takes place right in front of me. When her eyes open again it is clear that she has won her internal battle. The sun has set now, but the first light of the moon reflects in her steely gaze and I know that she is ready to fight with all her might. I weigh my trusty hammer in my hands and push the pain of my scar to the back of my mind. Seliel starts to talk about a back-up plan. Something about the Mayor and a warehouse. I catch something out of

the corner of my eye before she can finish. A shadowy figure lurking in a nearby alley. They are here!
I twirl into Spinjitzu and cover the distance in the blink of an eye. I don't hold back and expect the sound of rattling bones as I take down the Skullkin. But there is no rattling of bones. A pained moan sounds as the figure flies backwards from the impact and then a fleshy thud as it hits a wall. I strike my fists together and lift my hammer for another strike. The green light from my scar mixes with the orange glow and create a weird unmatched palette which illuminates my foe. And can't believe my eyes.

I can't believe my eyes! I haven't seen Cole since shortly after the Ninja's Master Wu went missing. What is he doing here? And why is that scar he suffered on the Day of the Departed lit up bright green. And OW! ... that really hurt.
Cole looks as surprised to see me as I am to see him. At least my presence here makes sense ... well, if you know me that is. There is money to be made and rumours have it, that there are plenty of precious metal from defunct Nindroids rusting away in the forests around here. But what is Cole doing here and why is he so on edge?!? I look over to another figure approaching. The features of a stern but beautiful female face catches the green/ orange light and bounces off her metallic armour. Something tells me that I have come across something more than just a romantic encounter in an alleyway.
Cole grabs my collar and a pull me to my feet with something that looks like a relived smile.
'Ronin! What the heck are you doing here? Did you bring weapons? You're going to need weapons!'
'... Why do in need...'
And in that moment I learn what the sounds from the forest were and why I need weapons. Skullkin come running down the main street screaming tongue-less battle screams.
Cole and the woman spin around. They share a brief look and put on their masks. Well done Ronin! You have walked right into what is none of your business. Again! Why do this

always happen to me? I hear my wife's voice in my head saying those exact words. And though every sensible fibre in my body screams for me to get out of here, I know I cannot. I'm not cut out for hero stuff but Cole is a friend ... kind of at least, and he needs my help. Besides there aren't that many sensible fibres in my body anyway. The woman tosses me a sword.
'Name's Seliel.', she says before storming off after Cole.
'If it rattles, break it!'

The Skullkin are dragging people from their homes. I know why. Master Yang told me. The hapless citizens of Nom will be hosts to the Edo acolytes from the Departed Realm once the scar on my forehead finally bursts open and allow them to escape to this reaml. It is probably my imagination, but it feels like hundreds of tiny hands are pressing outwards on my skull. I shake it off and attack.
This is one of those moments my mother spoke to me about. I didn't understand it fully at the time, and I'm not really sure I do now. My head is spinning and I can't quite make out or remember her exact words right now, but it gave me something to strive for. I hope I will find some time for me to reflect on it at some point. If I live long enough that is.
Splinters of bone rain down on my face as I free two children from the grasp of a Skullin. I Spinjitzu over and free some more. More bone fragments. And more...
And then I see another familiar face. It would have been good news but there is something menacing about his posture ... His large metallic frame is unmistakable: Karloff the Metalonian, the Master of Metal. But still it is his eyes which draw my attention. They are not friendly. I am just about to speak when he opens his mouth. It's not a word.

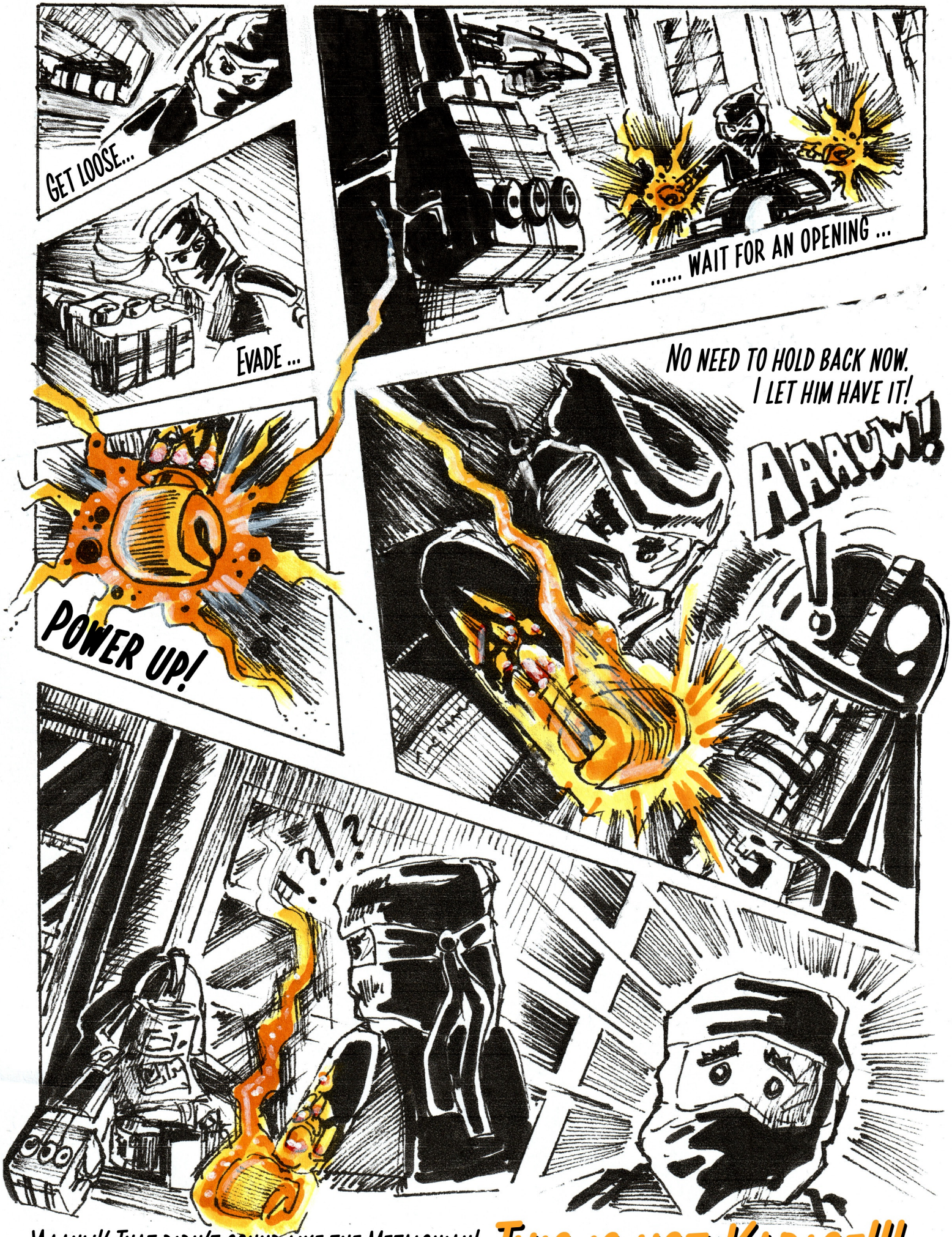
I let out a howl and charge at Cole. I am not exactly sure why. My head hurts...

I duck. Karloff's massive fist misses my head by an inch. He has not switched to metal mode yet. When he does I am in real trouble. I switch off my thoughts. I NEED TO ACT ON INSTINCT...

Way of the Departed
CHAPTER 24

THE MASTER OF EARTH... (ME!)
... VERSUS THE MASTER OF METAL... (HIM!)
I TRY TO REASON WITH HIM...
WE DON'T NEED TO DO THIS!
KARLOF WAS NEVER SHY TO TALK ... BUT NO RESPONSE.
I BACK AWAY AND LET HIM MAKE THE FIRST MOVE.
FOCUS ...
EVADE!
STRIKE! (MISS)

FOCUS ...
STRIKE!
(HLT)
RAAAAAAAAH!!!
ALL METAL ... NO FUN!
HAMMER'S GONE!
IF HE HITS ME NOW I BECOME THE MASTER OF DUST!


GET LOOSE...
EVADE ...
..... WAIT FOR AN OPENING ...
NO NEED TO HOLD BACK NOW.
I LET HIM HAVE IT!
AAAUW!!
POWER UP!
!?!?
'AAAUW!' THAT DIDN'T SOUND LIKE THE METALONIAN!
THAT WAS NOT KARLOF'S VOICE!
IT FINALLY CLICKS...
THIS IS NOT KARLOF!!!